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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

ساڈھ روزنامہ بنگلور

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Epstein files refer to Ayurvedic 'massage methods'

NEW YORK 20 DEC

The US Justice Department has released thousands of files linked to late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, following a law signed by President Donald Trump mandating their disclosure. The release is politically sensitive, as Epstein had connections with several powerful figures, including Trump and former president Bill Clinton, though neither has been accused of wrongdoing. Among the documents are references to massage techniques and Ayurveda from India, described as a 5,000-year-old system used for detoxification. The files include limited photographs and. Epstein died by suicide in a New York jail in 2019. *—PTI*

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CJI-led spl bench to sit on 22 Dec for urgent matters

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

Chief Justice of India Surya Kant will preside over a special vacation bench of the Supreme Court on 22 December, to hear urgent cases requiring immediate judicial intervention. According to the cause list, the bench, comprising CJI Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi, will sit at 11am and take up 17 criminal and civil matters. The Supreme Court said the special sitting has been arranged to ensure urgent cases are heard during the Christmas and New Year vacation. CJI Kant said the registry would verify the urgency of cases and list them accordingly, adding he would not burden other judges. The Court will be closed from 22 December to 2 January. *—PTI*

Security forces on alert over Jammu infiltration threat

JAMMU, 20 DEC

Security forces have intensified anti-terror operations across the Jammu region following intelligence inputs of a possible infiltration attempt by terrorists exploiting dense fog, officials said on Saturday. Joint teams of the police, Army, BSF and CRPF are conducting search and cordon operations near the International Border in Kathua, Samba, Jammu and Rajouri districts, as well as in the Chatroo forest belt of Kishtwar. Intelligence reports indicated suspected terrorist movement at launch pads across the border opposite Hiranagar, Ghagwal, Ramgarh and Akhnoor over the past two days.*—PTI*

Nirav Modi's trial adjourned over UK paperwork delays

LONDON, 20 DEC

A London court has allowed a plea by fugitive diamond merchant Nirav Modi to adjourn a trial in the Bank of India unpaid loan case until March over UK prison delays. The 54-year-old accused, fighting extradition to India in the estimated USD 2 billion Punjab National Bank (PNB) loan scam, was shifted from Thameside prison in south London to HMP Pentonville, north London, in October to facilitate an appearance at the High Court in London. At an online review hearing for the USD 8-million Bank of India case on Friday, Judge Simon Tinkler partially granted Nirav's application to adjourn the eight-day January trial by a few weeks until 23 March next year following delays by UK prison authorities in providing access to important legal paperwork. *—PTI*

PM SOUNDS POLL BUGLE IN BENGAL

With 'maha jungle raj' pitch, PM attacks TMC

KOLKATA, 20 DEC

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday launched a sharp attack on the Trinamool Congress (TMC), comparing what he described as the erstwhile "lawlessness" in Bihar with the situation "prevailing in West Bengal", which he termed a "maha jungle raj".

Addressing a large gathering at Taherpur in Nadia district, virtually, after dense fog prevented his helicopter from landing, Modi accused the ruling party of corruption and nepotism, alleging these had stalled development in the state. His remarks marked a clear pitch for the 2026 West Bengal Assembly elections.

Referring to the NDA's landslide victory in the recent Bihar elections, Modi said the outcome would positively influence the BJP's prospects in West Bengal. "The election results in Bihar have opened the doors for BJP's victory in West Bengal because, as I have said before, the Ganga flows into West Bengal through Bihar," he said.

Urging voters to give the BJP a chance, Modi called for a "double engine government" — a BJP administration both at the Centre and in the state — to accelerate development.

Dense fog at Taherpur prevented Modi's helicopter from landing at the makeshift helipad **PHOTO: PTI**

"Let the TMC oppose me and the BJP as much as it wants, but why is the ruling party holding people to ransom, making them suffer and stopping West Bengal's progress?" he asked while addressing the Parivartan Sankalpa Sabha, the fourth such rally in the state this year.

The Prime Minister alleged that a culture of "cut money and commission" had stalled development despite there being "no dearth of goodwill, planning or funds", claiming welfare schemes worth thousands of crores were being blocked by the state government.

Referring to the recent "Bankim da" controversy in Parliament, Modi recalled Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, describing him as "Rishi Bankim Babu", and highlighted the ongoing 150th anniversary celebrations of 'Vande Mataram'.

Earlier, West Bengal Governor C V Ananda Bose inaugurated national highway projects worth Rs 3,200 crore at Taherpur to boost economic activity and tourism. *—PTI*

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Train mows down 3 on way to PM's rally amid fog

Three people were killed, and three others were injured when they were hit by a train amid dense fog on Saturday. They were going to attend Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rally at Taherpur in West Bengal's Nadia district, a senior official said.

The incident occurred between Taherpur and Badkulla railway stations in the Sealdah-Krishnanagar section of the Eastern Railway, he said.

Modi, whose helicopter could not land at Taherpur due to dense fog condoled the death of the "BJP workers" in his virtual address from the Kolkata airport.

The Eastern Railway official said the incident occurred in the morning, when these people, who were travelling by a bus, had stopped the vehicle and walked to the railway tracks to answer nature's call. Mahua Moitra, TMC MP from Nadia district, alleged that the BJP ignored the incident and went ahead with the rally. *— PTI*

The operation, which began at 4am along Bande Road, targeted allegedly illegal constructions in Fakir Colony and Waseem Layout **PHOTO: SALAR**

Over 200 homes razed in Bengaluru

BENGALURU, 20 DEC

Bengaluru witnessed one of its largest eviction and demolition drives on Saturday morning as the Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) razed more than 200 houses in Kogilu Layout near Yelahanka, leaving over 3,000 people homeless.

The clearance operation, which began around 4 am along Bande Road, targeted allegedly illegal constructions in Fakir Colony and Waseem Layout. With six JCBs and four earthmovers deployed under heavy police protection, authorities demolished houses built on government land adjoining a small pond near Urdhu Government School. Nearly 400 families were affected.

Officials said the land belonged to the GBA and had been transferred to the civic body in 2016 before being allotted to Bengaluru Solid Waste Management Limited. They alleged private individuals had ille-gally sold plots, leading to unauthorised constructions on civic and gomal land.

Two eviction notices were issued in the past month, officials said. Residents contested the claims, stating they possessed voter IDs, electricity connections and paid regular power bills. Many said they had lived there for decades and were never stopped during construction. Emotional scenes unfolded as families hurriedly removed belongings, with women and elderly residents breaking down in tears. Over 150 police personnel were deployed, with ambulances stationed on site and a BMTC bus kept ready to detain protesters. *—Salar News*

Dipu Chandra Das, 25, was lynched by a mob and his body set on fire for alleged blasphemy in Mymensingh on Thursday **PHOTO: PTI**

7 held for Hindu man's lynching in B'desh

DHAKA/NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

Seven people have been arrested in connection with the lynching of a Hindu man in Bangladesh, the interim government announced on Saturday. Meanwhile, the army chiefs of India and Bangladesh are in direct contact with each other to maintain stability on the ground.

Dipu Chandra Das, 25, was lynched by a mob and his body set on fire for alleged blasphemy in Mymensingh on Thursday.

In a statement on X, the interim government led by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus said that the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) arrested seven suspects in the case.

Police said that Das, a factory worker, was first beaten up by a mob outside the factory over blasphemy allegations and hanged from a tree.

The crowd then left Das's body by the side of the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway and set it on fire. The police sent the body to the Mymensingh Medical College for autopsy.

The interim government on Friday condemned the lynching, saying there is no place for violence in Bangladesh. "The perpetrators of this heinous crime will not be spared," it added.

The Hindus of Bangladesh has been affected by a series of violent incidents after the ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024.

Bangladesh Army chief General Waker-Uz-Zaman reportedly assured his Indian counterpart that all Indian assets in Bangladesh are secure, emphasising Dhaka's commitment to protecting foreign missions.

The unrest in Bangladesh worsened after the death of anti-India radical leader Sharif Osman Hadi. *— PTI*

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Delhi airport sees 129 flight cancellations amid fog

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

At least 129 flights were cancelled at the Delhi airport on Saturday due to dense fog, officials said, as low visibility continued to disrupt air traffic for the past several days at Delhi and other airports. An official said 66 arriving and 63 departing flights were cancelled.

"Low Visibility Procedures are currently in progress at Delhi Airport due to dense fog. While operations remain normal, passengers are advised to check flight status with their airlines," Delhi airport operator DIAL said.

DELHI GETS ITS FIRST COLD WAVE

Delhi recorded its first cold wave of the season on Saturday, with the maximum temperature dropping to 16.9 degrees Celsius, 5.3 degrees below normal, marking the coldest December day so far, the IMD said. Safdarjung recorded 16.9 degrees Celsius and Palam 16.3 degrees Celsius. *—PTI*

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4 beat boy with pipes in Bagalkot

BAGALKOT, 20 DEC

Four people were taken into custody on Saturday in the assault on a 16-year-old differently-abled boy, after videos of the incident went viral, police said.

The footage shows the boy being assaulted at a residential school in the city.

The assault occurred three months ago, and the matter came to light after a video of the incident was shared with the boy's parents by a former school employee, they added.

In one of the videos, a man was seen beating the boy with a belt and a pipe, after pinning him down with his foot.

Superintendent of Police Siddharth Goyal said the school for differently-abled children is run by a husband-and-wife duo.

"In the video the couple is seen hitting the 16-year-old boy with a pipe and other things," he said.

The boy's parents filed a complaint, based on which an FIR has been registered under the Juvenile Justice Act, Goyal confirmed.

Noting that the incident occurred three months ago, the SP said the video was recorded by a staffer. "After getting dismissed, the person shared the video with the boy's parents, who then approached the police," he said.

Police are also checking the role of other caretakers at the institution, Goyal said, adding that the help of the Department for the Empowerment of Differently Abled Persons and the Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) has been sought. *—PTI*

Indian cyber agency flags WhatsApp 'hijack'

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

Indian cyber security agency CERT-In has flagged a vulnerability in the WhatsApp "device-linking" feature. The issue, which the agency is calling Ghost Pairing, enables attackers to take "complete" control of an account, including access to real-time messages, photos, and videos on the web version.

The advisory said the high-severity attack typically begins with a message such as "Hi, check this photo" from a trusted contact, containing a link with a Facebook-style preview. The link redirects users to a fake Facebook viewer that prompts them to "verify," tricking victims into entering their phone numbers and unknowingly granting attackers full access to their WhatsApp accounts by exploiting the app's device-linking feature.

Attackers can read messages that sync to their device, receive new messages view photos, videos and voice notes, and can send messages to the victim's contacts. *—PTI*

7 JUMBOS KILLED AS RAJDHANI EXPRESS HITS HERD IN ASSAM

GUWAHATI, 20 DEC

At least seven elephants were killed and a calf injured after a herd was struck by the Sairang–New Delhi Rajdhani Express in Assam's Hojai district early on Saturday, disrupting rail services.

The New Delhi-bound train hit a herd of around 100 elephants at about 2.17 am. Helpline numbers were issued at Guwahati railway station: 0361-2731621, 0361-2731622 and 0361-2731623.

Assam is home to India's second-largest elephant population and records some of the country's highest levels of human-elephant conflict as deforestation fragments habitats. Data show that 81 elephants were killed in train collisions.*—PTI*

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'MISLEADING ACCUSATIONS'

Eggs safe, cancer risk claims baseless: FSSAI

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) categorically stated on Saturday that eggs available in the country are safe for human consumption and that claims linking eggs to cancer are misleading and scientifically unsupported.

Responding to media reports alleging the presence of carcinogenic substances like nitrofuran metabolites (AOZ) in eggs, FSSAI officials clarified that the use of nitrofurans is strictly prohibited in all stages of production of poultry and eggs under the Food Safety and Standards (Contaminants, Toxins and Residues) Regulations, 2011.

FSSAI said an Extraneous Maximum Residue Limit (EMRL) of 1.0 ug/kg has been set for nitrofuran metabolites solely for regulatory enforcement. This limit represents the minimum level that can be detected by advanced laboratory methods and does not indicate that the substance is permitted for use.

"Detection of trace residues below the EMRL does not constitute a risk," an official said.

FSSAI emphasised that India's regulatory framework is aligned with international practices. The European Union and the United States also prohibit the use of nitrofurans in food-producing animals.

FSSAI cited scientific evidence indicating that there is no established link between trace dietary exposure to nitrofuran metabolites and cancer in humans.

No national or international medical authority has associated normal egg consumption with cancer, the authority reiterated. Addressing reports on testing a specific egg brand, officials explained that such detections are isolated and batch-specific, often arising from inadvertent contamination. *—PTI*

MALAYALAM ACTOR-SCREENWRITER SREENIVASAN DIES AT 69

KOCHI, 20 DEC

Actor, filmmaker and screenwriter Sreenivasan, one of Malayalam cinema's most incisive voices, died on Saturday after a prolonged illness. He was 69.

1956-2025

Renowned for blending sharp social criticism with humour and political satire, Sreenivasan carved a unique space in Malayalam cinema through writing and performances rooted in everyday life. Widely loved for his natural wit and spontaneous comedy, it was his scripts and directorial work that established him as a towering creative force. Often described as the "Bernard Shaw of Malayalam cinema", his films combined humour, sarcasm and empathy, making complex ideas accessible without losing their edge.

He acted in 220 films, sharing screen space with Mohanlal and Mammootty. *—PTI*

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PHOTO: PTI

Man booked for offensive post about HK Patil

GADAG, 20 DEC

A man was arrested on Saturday for allegedly posting derogatory and provocative content against Karnataka Minister HK Patil, police said. The accused, identified as Veeranna P Beelagi, is accused of posting offensive remarks targeting the state's Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister on his Facebook page. Following the posts, a complaint was lodged at the Betageri police station.

A senior police officer described the comments as "loose talk" and said they were objectionable in nature. Based on the complaint, police registered a case against Beelagi under relevant provisions of the Information Technology Act and arrested him. Further investigation into the matter is under way. *—PTI*

High Command will call us when appropriate: DKS

DKS says High Command has sent a message to him & CM

BENGALURU, 20 DEC

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar said that the High Command has sent both him and Chief Minister Siddaramaiah the same message – that it will call them to New Delhi at the appropriate time.

"I won't travel to Delhi secretively. I will travel with the CM when the High command calls us," Shivakumar said while speaking to reports at his Sadashivanagar residence on Saturday. "We will inform you (media) if we are travelling."

Asked if there was any invitation from the High Command, asking him and CM to come to Delhi, he said, "they have told something to both of us, they have told both of us over phone as to when they will call us. We will go, both of us will go."

"They have said they will call both of us at the appropriate time, we will wait for the call," the KPCC President added.

DyCM DK Shivakumar addresses a rally about the National Herald case at Freedom Park, Bengaluru on Saturday *PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD*

Shivakumar said he will travel to Delhi on Tuesday to meet various Central ministers. He will also respond to the National Herald case summons then, he said.

"The Union Jal Shakthi minister has called for a meeting on river linking project on that day," he said. "I will also discuss key irrigation projects of the state such as Mahadayi, Upper Krishna, Mekedatu, Upper Bhadra. I have sought time from the Union Environment minister and Union Urban Development minister as well. I am meeting all of them to protect the State's interest. I had plans of meeting State MPs, I will meet the PM along with them if time permits."

Meanwhile some 'Naga Sadhus' visited the Deputy CM's residence and blessed him.

"We can't say no to people who come home," he remarked, unwilling to link it to the power tussle with Siddaramaiah. "In politics, it is natural for sages, saints, seers and seniors to bless us."

Shivakumar's statement comes a day after Siddaramaiah asserted in the Assembly that there was no power sharing agreement between the two and that he would continue in office. Siddaramaiah had also said that the Congress High Command was "in my favour".

Separately, Shivakumar, had said that he and Siddaramaiah had come to an "agreement" with the involvement of the Congress High Command.

—Salar News with Agencies

BY CO-ACCUSED

D'sthala complainant alleges life threats

MANGALURU, 20 DEC

In another twist to the Dharmasthala mass burials case, the masked complainant CN Chinnaiah, has filed a police complaint against five people who are also implicated in the case - claiming threats to his life.

Chinnaiah said that activists Mahesh Shetty Thimarody, Girish Mattennavar, T Jayanth, Vittala Gowda, and YouTuber Samir MD could harm him and his wife due to his retracted statements in connection with allegations of multiple cases of rape, murder and burials in Dharmasthala, police said on Saturday.

The five members named in Chinnaiah's complaint had led the campaign demanding justice for 17-year-old Soujanya, who was allegedly raped and murdered on 9 October, 2012, near Dharmasthala. They are accused of allegedly pressurising Chinnaiah to give a false complaint in the case.

Chinnaiah, who was released from Shivamogga district jail on 18 December on bail after being arrested for perjery, approached the Dharmasthala police station the same evening, accompanied by his wife and sister.

He has urged authorities to provide protection and prevent harassment, holding them responsible for any untoward incident. Belthangady police have registered the complaint.

Last month, the Special Investigation Team (SIT) constituted to probe the case submitted a 3,900-page report to the Judicial First Class Magistrate Court in Belthangady, naming Chinnaiah, Thimarody, Mattennavar, Jayanth, Gowda, and Sujatha Bhat – who said her daughter Ananya went missing near Dharmasthala years ago.

Chinnaiah, a former sanitation worker, originally claimed that dozens of bodies of women and minors, some bearing marks of sexual assault, were secretly buried between 1995 and 2014 in Dharmasthala, following which the SIT was constituted. The SIT, however, found inconsistencies in his statements and evidence. *—PTI*

Congress leaders protest at Freedom Park in Bengaluru on Saturday against the Centre's decision to rename MGNREGA as VB-G Ram G, removing Mahatma Gandhi's name from the flagship rural employment scheme *PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD*

Cong protests MGNREGA renaming

BENGALURU, 20 DEC

The Congress held a protest here against the Centre on Saturday for replacing MGNREGA, and accused it of practising "hate politics" against its leaders in the National Herald case.

The protest at the Freedom Park, led by Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar, was attended by party leaders and legislators.

The Parliament clearned Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Bill, 2025, replacing the existing rural employment law Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

Shivakumar vowed to launch a big movement in the State against the VB-G-RAM-G Bill alleging that the Centre wanted to kill MGNREGA and remove Mahatma Gandhi's name.

"Gandhi's India be converted into (Nathuram) Godse's India," Shivakumar said, lambasting the BJP as traitors for removing Gandhi's name.

The Congress alleged that the BJP was misusing Central agencies like the ED for political vendetta. *—PTI*

BJP worker dies by 'suicide' in Kalaburagi

KALABURAGI, 20 DEC

A shocking incident in Nandikur village, Kalaburagi district has left the local community reeling after BJP worker Jyoti Patil set herself on fire and died at the premises of fellow party member Mallinath Biradar. The tragedy occurred late at night when Biradar was not at home; his wife and three children opened the door to Patil, who allegedly poured petrol over herself and ignited it immediately.

A case was registered at Farhatabad police station, and Mallinath Biradar has been taken into custody for questioning.

Jyoti Patil, a resident of the Brahmapur area of Kalaburagi, was married to Chidanand, who has expressed serious doubts over the suicide theory, stating he suspects foul play.

Police are probing all angles. *—Salar News*

Help is available. Please call Tele Manas at 14416, SAHAI at 080-25497777 for support.

'VijAIpatha' kicks off in govt schools

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman with students during the launch of Cyient AI Labs (CyAILS) - 'VijAIpatha' in government schools of Hosapete on Saturday *PHOTO: PTI*

HAMPI, 20 DEC

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Saturday launched Cyient AI Labs (CyAILS) 'VijAIpatha', aimed at democratising access to Artificial Intelligence, STEM and Robotics education in government schools here.

The minister's office shared pictures on X of the scheme launched at a girls' government school in Hosapete taluk and said that during the pilot phase, five world-class AI, STEM and Robotics laboratories are being established in government schools.

Each lab will be equipped with high-performance computers, AI-ready software, robotics kits, IoT devices, sensors and secure broadband connectivity.

"Aligned with NEP 2020, Digital India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's mission of Viksit Bharat 2047, the programme integrates CBSE's AI curriculum and strengthens technology-enabled learning in public education," it said.

Focusing on rural and semi-urban India, the scheme introduces future technologies at the school level, helping build early digital fluency, computational thinking and innovation capacity among students, her office said.

"Benefiting over 2,000 students and training around 200 teachers, 'VijAIpatha' is a scalable CSR model fostering innovation, career readiness and grassroots digital empowerment," it added. *—PTI*

TIGER SIGHTINGS SPARK FEAR AROUND BRT AND BANDIPUR

MYSURU, 20 DEC

After five tigers were seen moving by trap cameras near the Biligiri Ranganatha Swamy Temple (BRT) Wildlife Sanctuary and Chamarajanagar buffer zone limits, panic gripped villagers of Nanjadevanpura and adjoining villages in Gundlupet and Chamarajanagar taluks.

The trap cameras were installed in agriculture fields near the forest areas late Friday, and the footage has since gone viral.

On Thursday, the big cats were caught by trap cameras killing two cows at Mudgur village in the Gundlupet buffer zone of Bandipur Tiger Reserve.

The big cats also attacked two cows belonging to farmer Siddashetty when they were grazing in the agriculture fields at Bheemanabeedu village in Gundlupet taluk.

Siddashetty urged the forest department officials to provide compensation.

Villagers in the taluks have urged the forest department to step up their combing operations and prevent human-animal conflict by relocating the tigers to safer forest areas.

Several people have been killed by tigers in the State recently. *—Salar News*

CALL FOR RECOGNITION

Members of the Karnataka State Gram Panchayat Workers Association and CITU protest at Freedom Park on Saturday, demanding that tax collectors, clerks, data entry operators and sanitation workers in Gram Panchayats be declared government employees *PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD*

State to lead India in inclusive skilling: Minister

BENGALURU, 20 DEC

Karnataka is positioning itself as a national leader in inclusive skilling and employment for people with disabilities, Skill Development and Medical Education Minister Dr Sharanaprakash R Patil said on Saturday.

Addressing Job Habba, a dedicated employment platform for persons with disabilities organised at BMS Women's College, Patil said inclusive growth was both a moral imperative and an economic necessity. He noted that Karnataka is home to over 20 lakh people with disabilities and is working on a new framework to expand opportunities in education and employment.

Highlighting the draft Karnataka Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Employment and Education Bill, 2025, he said it proposes a 5 per cent job quota in the private sector and 10 per cent reservation in education.

He announced collaboration with AssisTech Foundation to deploy assistive technologies, AI-enabled learning tools and employer sensitisation programmes. *—Salar News*

DEMAND SURGES

Avarekai takes Kolar markets by storm

KOLAR, 20 DEC

Amid the fog in Kolar, avarekai (hyacinth beans) has taken over the markets. Avarekai, a seasonal favourite for many in the State, has engulfed the roadside vegetable markets of Kolar and Srinivasapur taluks as people throng to Ambedkar park on Tekal road, Sharada Talkies in Kataripalya and other such areas to purchase the vegetable.

Sold at around Rs 80 per kg, avarekai is grown in at least 5,500 acres of land in Kolar district as a mixed crop.

Srinath, a trader at Kolar said avarekai has been ruling the market as the demand for other vegetables has gone down considerably in the last three or so weeks. Some vegetables which were sold at around Rs 70 per kilogram are now being sold at around Rs 30 to Rs 40 per kilogram thanks to the demand for avarekai, he said. Many farmers who grew other vegetables are now selling their produce on 'mixed vegetable' basis priced at Rs 100 for 2kgs in Kolar.

Avarekai - a seasonal favourite - is being sold at around Rs 80/kg in Kolar at a high demand, forcing vendors to sell other crops at discounted rates *PHOTO: SALAR*

Farmers reported a bountiful yield this year, unlike the previous year where untimely rains lashed several parts of the State – including Kolar – and ruined the harvest.

Venkatesh, a lecturer in Kolar, said that his family loves several dishes featuring avarekai and have already begun purchasing the crop.

Some farmers believe that the agricultural department should take steps to popularise the crop, arguing that the demand has been increasing.

Notably, avarekai is not sold at the Kolar APMC yard, authorities said. *—Salar News*

ISRO's drogue parachute deployment tests successful

BENGALURU, 20 DEC

A series of qualification tests for drogue parachutes, which have been carried out to develop a deceleration system for ISRO's Gaganyaan crew module, were successful, the agency said on Saturday.

These tests were completed at the Rail Track Rocket Sled (RTRS) facility of the Terminal Ballistics Research Laboratory (TBRL) in Chandigarh, on 18 and 19 December, the ISRO said.

The deceleration system of the Gaganyaan crew module comprises 10 parachutes of four types, the agency said.

The descent sequence begins with the separation of two apex cover separation parachutes, which remove the protective cover from the parachute compartment. This is followed by the deployment of two drogue parachutes that stabilise and decelerate the module.

"Upon release of the drogues, three pilot parachutes are deployed to extract three main parachutes, which slow down the crew module to ensure a safe touchdown," ISRO said.

The drogue parachutes play a pivotal role in stabilising the crew module and reducing its velocity during re-entry. *—PTI*

PHOTO: ANI

India will be 3rd largest economy by 2027: Scindia

INDORE, 20 DEC

Union Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia has expressed confidence that India will surpass Germany to become the world's third-largest economy by 2027. Speaking at the YEF Bharat Summit 2025, he highlighted that India's GDP has grown from USD 2.3 trillion to USD 4.5 trillion under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, rising from 10th to 4th globally and overtaking Japan. Scindia credited steady policies and institutional reforms, including the removal of colonial-era laws, for improving the ease of doing business. Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav said the state is India's fastest-growing, offering a favourable investment environment. At the Global Investors Summit, agreements worth Rs 32 lakh crore were signed. *—PTI*

Cong's Alka Lamba to face charges in cop assault case

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

A Delhi court has ordered the framing of charges against Congress leader Alka Lamba over an alleged assault on police during a women's reservation protest at Jantar Mantar on 29 July, 2024. The court observed there was a prima facie case against her. Lamba is accused of obstructing police, blocking public roads, pushing officers, and leading protesters beyond the permissible protest area. She faces charges under Sections 132, 221, 223(a), and 285 of the BNS.

The court rejected her plea for discharge, noting she endangered the safety of both demonstrators and public servants. It emphasised that, at this stage, the court only considers whether sufficient material exists to raise grave suspicion. Lamba must appear on 5 January, 2026 for charges.*—PTI*

INS Sindhughosh decommissioned after 40 years

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

Sindhughosh, the lead submarine of her class with the Indian Navy, has been decommissioned after 40 years of glorious service to the nation, the Western Naval Command said on Saturday. The decommissioning ceremony was held at the Naval Dockyard, Mumbai, in the presence of WNC's Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief (FOCINC) Vice Admiral Krishna Swaminathan. The submarine was paid off under the command of Lt Cdr Rajat Sharma. Capt KR Ajrekar (retd), the second Commanding Officer of the submarine, was the guest of honour, it said. The Western Naval Command also shared some photos of the ceremony.*—PTI*

NIA arrests 2 Maoists over M'rashtra youth's killing

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) has arrested two Maoists allegedly involved in the murder of a Maharashtra youth suspected of being a police informer. The accused, members of the banned CPI (Maoist) group, are Raghu, alias Pratap, from Nizamabad, Telangana, and Shankar Mahaka from Gadchiroli, Maharashtra. AThe victim, Dinesh Pusu Gawade, was abducted and killed in November 2023 in Gadchiroli over suspicions of links with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and cooperation with police. The NIA said the murder aimed to terrorise villagers and prevent them from sharing information on Naxal activities.

The agency, which took over the case in October 2024, had previously charge sheeted four others. Investigations continue to uncover the full conspiracy. *—PTI*

TMC opposes SIR to shield infiltrators: PM

Modi addresses gathering in Matua amid vote concerns

KOLKATA, DEC 20

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday sharpened his attack on the Trinamool Congress (TMC), ac-cusing it of shielding "infiltrators" in West Bengal and opposing the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls to prevent them from being identified.

"Infiltrators enjoy the support and patronage of the TMC in West Bengal," Modi alleged while addressing a gathering in Ranaghat, a Bangladesh-bordering area and a stronghold of the Matua community, a Hindu migrant group from Bangladesh.

Claiming that the TMC was opposing the SIR to protect illegal immigrants, Modi said the party had "no love" for persecuted refugees whom the Centre was seeking to grant citizenship under the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA). "They are spreading false narratives to scare them," he said.

The Prime Minister's address came amid apprehensions among sections of the Matua community over possible disenfranchisement following the publication of the draft SIR rolls. Seeking to reassure the group, Modi invoked Matua sect founders Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur, praising their role in the social uplift of the community.

Greeting the crowd with the slogan 'Joy Nitai', Modi also highlighted the contributions of 15th-century saint Nityananda and Bhakti reformer Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, both revered by the Matua community.

The TMC, however, strongly countered the Prime Minister's remarks. Mamata Bala Thakur, TMC Rajya Sabha MP and a prominent Matua leader, said Modi's speech reflected a "lack of concern" for the com-munity. "The Prime Minister did not utter a single word to allay the anxieties of Matuas who fear losing their voting rights in the current SIR atmosphere," she said.

TMC state general secretary Kunal Ghosh also criticised Modi, alleging that he failed to address com-plaints of harassment faced by Bengali-speaking people in BJP-ruled states. "The Prime Minister's speech lacked vision and responsibility," Ghosh said.

Later in the day, Modi inaugurated the new terminal of the Lokapriya Gopinath Bardoloi International Airport in Guwahati, Assam. Touted as India's first "nature-themed airport", the terminal has a capacity of 13.1 million passengers annually. Built at a cost of Rs 5,000 crore — including Rs 1,000 crore for Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul facilities — the project was described by Adani Group chairman Gautam Adani as a catalyst for regional and industrial growth. Modi also held discussions with BJP leaders at the party's state headquarters in Guwahati on preparations for the Assam Assembly elections due next year. He is on a two-day visit to the state and will on Sunday lay the foundation stone for a Rs 10,600-crore brownfield ammonia-urea plant in Dibrugarh, part of projects worth Rs 15,600 crore slated for launch ahead of the polls. *—PTI*

PM Narendra Modi with Adani Group Chairperson Gautam Adani during the inauguration of the airport, in Guwahati on Saturday **PHOTO: PTI**

'A BLACK LAW'

Modi govt bulldozed MGNREGA, Cong will fight it: Sonia

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

Congress Parliamentary Party chairperson Sonia Gandhi accused the Modi government of bulldozing the MGNREGA, and asserted that the "black law" will be defeated by Congress workers.

In a video message on Saturday, she said that by weakening MGNREGA, the Modi government had attacked farmers and the landless poor.

She said, due to MGNREGA, migration in search of work came to a halt, a legal right to employment was provided, and gram panchayats were empowered.

"But it is a matter of great regret that the government bulldozed MGNREGA. Not only was Mahatma Gandhi's name removed, but the form and structure of MGNREGA was changed arbitrarily without consulting anyone," she said.

Parliament passed the VB-G RAM G Bill on Thursday to replace the 20-year-old Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, or MGNREGA.

The proposed bill that guarantees 125 days of rural wage employment every year was met with protests by the Opposition.

Meanwhile, the Congress said that the SHANTI Bill was "bulldozed" in Parliament to help Prime Minister Modi "restore SHANTI" with his "once good friend."

Congress General Secretary Jairam Ramesh said the SHANTI Bill does away with key provisions of the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, a concern raised in the United States' National Defence Authorisation Act for 2026.

"Now we know why the Prime Minister bulldozed the SHANTI Bill that did away with the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010. It was to restore SHANTI with his once good friend," he said. *— PTI*

- Meanwhile, the Congress said that the SHANTI Bill was "bulldozed" in Parliament to help Prime Minister Modi "restore SHANTI" with his "once good friend."

Global order established 80 years ago unravelling: EAM

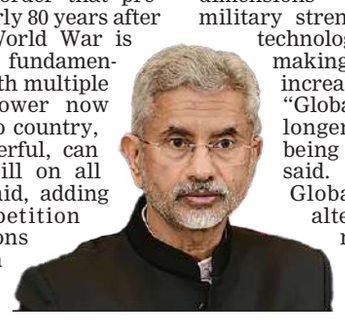
PUNE, 20 DEC

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on Saturday said the global political landscape today resembles "coalition politics", with constantly shifting alignments, and stressed that India must remain nimble while firmly pursuing its national interests.

Addressing the 22nd convocation of Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Jaishankar said the global economic and political pecking order that prevailed for nearly 80 years after the Second World War is undergoing a fundamental change, with multiple centres of power now emerging. "No country, however powerful, can impose its will on all issues," he said, adding that competition among nations has created a new balance.

He noted that power today has many dimensions — trade, energy, military strength, resources, technology and talent — making global politics increasingly complex. "Global powers are no longer capable of being universal," he said.

Globalisation has altered the way nations think and work, Jaishankar said. *—PTI*



Your question is wrong. You should have asked me: there is one Modi. Because ultimately, shri Hanuman finally serves... Countries are defined by leaders and vision. There are people who execute it. But ultimately, it is the vision, the leadership, and the confidence that makes the difference today

-S Jaishankar when asked 'if one Jaishankar is enough for the country'

Congress gears up to face Mumbai civic polls on its own

MUMBAI, 20 DEC

Mumbai Congress president Varsha Gaikwad on Saturday said the BJP's "religious politics and double standards" would be rejected by Mumbai's voters who will focus on core civic issues.

Polls to 29 municipal corporations, including Mumbai, will take place on 15 January.

She said while BJP's Mumbai unit chief Ameet Satam claims NCP's Nawab Malik is unacceptable, the Ajit Pawar-led party's state president Sunil Tatkare holds discussions with senior BJP leader Ashish Shelar.

Speaking to reporters after chairing a party meeting, All India Congress Committee in-charge Ramesh Chennithala said the party would fight Mumbai civic polls on its own.

He said he has spoken to allies in the Maha Vikas Aghadi but the Congress' city leadership has decided to contest the local polls independently.

Meanwhile, party sources said Shiv Sena (UBT) leaders Uddhav Thackeray and Sanjay Raut spoke to Chennithala twice for an alliance but he conveyed his party's stand to them.

The Maha Vikas Aghadi comprises the Congress, the Sharad Pawar-led NCP (SP) and Thackeray's Shiv Sena (UBT).

Meanwhile, the BJP and the Shiv Sena are cautious before committing to forge an alliance to contest the Thane Municipal Corporation polls. *—PTI*

Chaos in Dharmabad on voting day over cash distribution

NANDED, 20 DEC

Tensions prevailed in the Dharmabad town of Nanded district amid allegations of distributing cash during voting for the local municipal council on Saturday, forcing the police to intervene and "free" some voters who were "confined" in a marriage hall.

Social media videos show people rushing out of a hall in the Bannali area. Local leaders of the BJP, NCP, and NCP (SP) were engaged in a heated verbal exchange in ward number 8.

Police defused the situation and ensured that the voting continued smoothly. *— PTI*

Most of deleted entries were bogus voters: EPS

CHENNAI, 20 DEC

The ruling DMK is likely to enact a "drama" in frustration as its dream of coming to power with "bogus" votes has been shattered by the EC, which has removed about 97 lakh voters during the SIR exercise, Leader of Opposition Edappadi K Palaniswami has claimed.

Taking a dig at Chief Minister MK Stalin, he alleged that the DMK led by him will attempt to unravel various myths and portray their votes as being lost.

"No one should fall for their trap. A situation where even a single genuine vote will be lost will not arise as long as the AIADMK exists," Palaniswami said on Friday.

Palaniswami said AIADMK's insistence for SIR from the beginning has been vindicated.

"The DMK is preparing to stage dramas lamenting in anger and anxiety that its dream of coming to power with fake votes has been shattered," the former chief minister said in the post.

He appealed to the people to fill Form 6 and submit it to the EC if their names were found missing and assured "that they will definitely be included." *—PTI*

Rahul met enemies of India: BJP

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

BJP on Saturday accused Rahul Gandhi of meeting with "enemies of India" during his visit to Germany, alleging he is hatching a conspiracy against the country. Addressing a press conference, BJP spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia displayed a purported photograph of Gandhi with Cornellia Woll, president of the Berlin-based Hertie School, claiming it as evidence of Gandhi's connection to "anti-India forces." Bhatia asserted that Woll is affiliated with the Central European University, funded by George Soros's Open Society Foundation.

The BJP has previously alleged that Congress leaders have ties with Soros-funded organizations involved in "anti-India" activities. Bhatia criticised Gandhi for meeting with "anti-India forces" and questioned why he travels abroad during Parliament sessions, alleging he insults India from foreign soil. "George Soros and Rahul Gandhi are two bodies but one soul," he charged.

Bhatia stated that Gandhi's actions represent a pattern of anti-national behavior, comparing him to Mir Zafar, a historical figure viewed as a traitor. He claimed Soros funds efforts to create unrest in India and undermines the country's integrity.

These snakelets within India need to be treated. People of the country are demanding it," Bhatia added.

There was no immediate response from Gandhi or the Congress party. *—PTI*

Agniveer quota in BSF hiked

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

The Union Home Ministry has announced a significant increase in the recruitment quota for ex-Agniveers applying for constable positions in the Border Security Force (BSF), raising it to 50 per cent from the previous 10 per cent, as per a recent gazette notification. This amendment to the Border Secu-rity Force, General Duty Cadre (Non-Gazetted) Recruitment Rules, 2015, introduces upper age-limit re-laxations of five years for the first batch of ex-Agniveers and three years for others.

The notification also states that ex-Agniveers will be exempt from the Physical Standard Test and the Physical Efficiency Test. Direct recruitment will reserve 50 per cent of vacancies for ex-Agniveers each recruitment year, alongside 10 per cent for ex-servicemen and up to 3 per cent for Combatised Constables (Tradesmen).

Recruitment procedures will proceed in two phases: the first phase will address the 50 per cent vacan-cies for ex-Agniveers and the second phase will fill the remaining 47 per cent, which includes unfilled ex-Agniveer vacancies. *—PTI*

NITISH FACES MORE FLAK

Hijab row: Woman doesn't appear for duty

PATNA/LUCKNOW, 20 DEC

The woman doctor whose hijab was removed by Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar did not appear for duty on Saturday, an official said.

The incident occurred on Monday at Patna's Chief Minister's secretariat when Ayush doctors were receiving appointment letters. Kumar attempted to remove Nusrat Parveen's hijab, drawing widespread condemnation.

"I have been informed that the last date of joining has been extended beyond 20 December. It remains to be seen whether Parveen joins on Monday or not," Patna Civil Surgeon Avinash Kumar Singh said on Saturday

Meanwhile, Jharkhand Health Minister Irfan Ansari said he has offered Parveen a job with a monthly salary of Rs 3 lakh, a flat, preferred posting, and full security. Ansari condemned Bihar Kumar's act, saying it demeaned the naqab and the Muslim community.

Bihar CM Nitish Kumar and doctor Nusrat Parveen **PHOTO: ANI**

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) expressed its "strongest condemnation". The association expressed shock that such a high ranking official would attempt to demean the dignity and autonomy of the woman.

"Besides infringing on her autonomy, agency and religious freedom, it is a reflection of the depraving attitude against women in general," the SCBA said.

It also condemned "the vile comments made by Union Minister Giriraj Singh and Uttar Pradesh Minister Sanjay Nishad", saying such remarks undermined the dignity of women.

Singh had said whether the woman "goes to hell" or joins her positing was her decision.

BSP supremo Mayawati on Saturday In a long Hindi post on X, said the 'naqqab' controversy was "sad and unfortunate", which continued to escalate due to some statements made by ministers subsequently. Mayawati said the matter, which is linked to women's safety and dignity, should have been resolved through the chief minister's direct intervention, saying, "It would be better if the chief minister views the incident in the right perspective." *—PTI*

AgustaWestland case: Court orders Michel's release

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

A Delhi court on Saturday ordered the release of Christian James Michel in the AgustaWestland money laundering case, noting he has already served the maximum seven-years under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act filed by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) .

The court said the accused is entitled to release and cannot be detained beyond 21 December 2025, noting that no person can be held during investigation, inquiry, or trial for longer than the maximum imprisonment prescribed for the offence.

Michel, accused as a 'middleman' in the AgustaWestland VVIP helicopter deal, was extradited from Dubai in December 2018 and arrested by the CBI and ED in related corruption and money laundering cases.

Michel has been accused in the two cases filed by the ED and the CBI in the alleged scam.

He had filed applications in both cases seeking custodial release. However, the alleged middleman will remain in jail as he continues to face a separate corruption probe by the CBI. The court listed the matter on 22 December for further hearing. *—PTI*

Snow, rain likely as Kashmir braces for 'Chillai-Kalan'

SRINAGAR, 20 DEC

Kashmir is set to experience a spell of wet weather from 20–21 December, coinciding with the onset of Chillai-Kalan, the Valley's 40-day harsh winter period beginning on 21 December, officials said. The meteorological department has forecast moderate to heavy snowfall in the higher reaches, while the plains may receive light to moderate precipitation.

Snowfall is most frequent during this period, accompanied by a sharp drop in temperatures.

Night temperatures improved slightly across the Valley, though Pulwama remained the coldest at minus 3.2°C. Srinagar recorded a minimum of minus 0.4°C. A thick layer of fog enveloped Srinagar and other areas on Saturday morning. Dry weather so far this winter has led to a rise in illnesses. *—PTI*

3 held for illegal sale of codeine cough syrup in UP

BIJNOR, 20 DEC

Three men have been arrested in Uttar Pradesh's Bijnor district for the illegal sale and non-medical use of codeine-laced cough syrup as part of a statewide crackdown, police said on Saturday. Additional Superintendent of Police Krishna Gopal Singh said the arrests followed a complaint filed on 23 November, by drug inspector Umesh Kumar Bharti against the accused Arun, Shivanshu and Resab, all residents of Bijnor. The trio were taken into custody on Friday after an investigation. Police said another related case is under investigation and further arrests are expected. The action is linked to a wider probe into an alleged network involved in the illegal storage and distribution of codeine-based syrups, including suspected cross-border trafficking. *—PTI*

Bihar workers dead in Napgur tragedy to get Rs 2L aid

PATNA, 20 DEC

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Saturday announced an ex gratia payment of Rs 2 lakh each to the families of six migrant workers from the state who were killed after a water tank collapsed at an industrial unit near Nagpur in Maharashtra, officials said. The incident occurred at around 9.30am on Friday and left nine others injured. Expressing grief over the deaths, Kumar directed the Bihar Resident Commissioner in New Delhi to coordinate with Maharashtra authorities to ensure the safe return of the victims' mortal remains to their native villages. He also instructed officials to ensure proper medical treatment for the injured workers from Bihar. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

TN nurses continue protest demanding job regularisation

CHENNAI, 20 DEC

A large number of nurses working on consolidated pay at state government medical facilities continued their protest for the third day on Saturday across Tamil Nadu demanding regularisation of service and other benefits. The protesters claimed they have been working on a contract for the last 10 years and could not avail any benefits, including maternity leave with pay. "We were seen as angels during the pandemic, but now we feel neglected. Though we continue to put in great efforts in taking care of the patients, we don't get pay and other benefits on par with government employees," a nurse said.She and hundreds of her colleagues were constrained to agitate to seek justice, the nurse added. Hundreds of nurses protested throughout the night of 19 December braving the nippy weather and brought their kids for the protest. *—PTI*

7 elephants killed as Rajdhani Express hits herd in Assam

Shrinking forests, migration disruption blamed

NAGAON/ GUWAHATI, 20 DEC

Seven elephants were killed after a herd is struck by the Sairang-New Delhi Rajdhani Express in Nagaon, Assam on Saturday *PHOTO: PTI*

At least seven elephants were killed and one injured after a herd was hit by the Sairang–New Delhi Rajdhani Express in Assam's Hojai district early on Saturday, officials said. Five coaches and the engine of the train also derailed in the accident, which occurred at 2.17 am near Changjurai village. No passengers were injured.

Initial reports suggested all eight elephants had died, but forest officials later confirmed that one calf survived with injuries and is undergoing treatment. Autopsies of the dead animals are under way, and cremation will be carried out near the accident site after legal formalities are completed.

Nagaon Divisional Forest Officer Suhas Kadam said heavy fog in the area is suspected to have contributed to the mishap. The Assam government has ordered a detailed enquiry into the incident. Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma directed the Forest Department to investigate the circumstances and take steps to secure wildlife corridors.

North Frontier Railway (NFR) chief spokesperson Kapinjal Kishore Sharma said the accident took place in the Jamunamukh–Kampur section under the Lumding division, about 126 km from Guwahati. He claimed the site is not a designated elephant corridor. According to Sharma, the train driver applied emergency brakes on spotting the herd, but the elephants collided with the train.

Passengers from the affected coaches were temporarily accommodated in vacant berths in other compartments. The train, without the derailed coaches, departed for Guwahati at 6.11 am, and additional coaches will be attached there before it resumes its onward journey.

Rail traffic was disrupted following the accident, with nine trains cancelled, 13 regulated and two short-terminated. Several services, including the Rangiya–New Tinsukia Express and Guwahati–Jorhat Town Jan Shatabdi Express, were among those cancelled.

Assam Congress president Gaurav Gogoi termed the deaths "deeply concerning", blaming unplanned and poorly regulated development for increasing human–animal conflict. He said shrinking forest cover and disrupted migration routes were making such incidents more frequent, and called for development policies that prioritise ecological safeguards alongside growth. *—PTI*

'MUST BE COMPENSATED'

Animals are silent victims of development: SC

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

The Supreme Court on Friday said courts would always lean in favour of animals, which suffer silently when their migration paths are blocked by human and commercial activity. Observing that constructions in elephant corridors interfere with animal movement, the court said the benefit must go to wildlife, which are silent victims of such developments.

A bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and Vipul M Pancholi deferred to January the hearing on petitions by owners of hotels and resorts in the Nilgiris, who have been asked to vacate forest areas following the Tamil Nadu government's notification of elephant corridors in the Sigur Plateau, saying the issue required detailed consideration.

The Madras High Court on 12 September had approved the recommendation of the apex court appointed panel, which had declared that the land purchased by private parties on the elephant corridors in the Sigur Plateau was illegal and that these constructions needed to be dismantled. Earlier, the top court was informed that there were over 800 constructions, including 39 resorts and 390 houses, inside the Sigur elephant corridor.

Senior advocates Salman Khurshid and Shoeb Alam submitted that the hotel and resort owners had purchased the properties much before the elephant corridors were notified and should be allowed to continue their eco-friendly operations without any expansion. Alam also said related matters are listed in January and should be heard together. *—PTI*

SC IMPOSES RS 10 CR EACH FINE ON BDS COLLEGES

JAIPUR, 20 DEC

In a significant ruling, the Supreme Court has imposed a fine of 10 crore each on 10 private dental colleges in Rajasthan for irregularities in admissions, holding that their blatant illegality and wilful violation of rules warranted strict punitive action.

A Bench of Justices Vijay Bishnoi and J K Maheshwari expressed strong disapproval of the actions of the colleges as well as the state government, observing that standards of medical education had been seriously undermined. The court also directed the Rajasthan government to deposit 10 lakh with the Rajasthan State Legal Services Authority (RSLSA) for failing to follow legal procedures in BDS admissions for the 2016–17 academic session.

The ruling followed findings that the state government had unauthorisedly reduced the NEET percentile by 10 per cent and a further 5 per cent, allowing ineligible students to secure admissions. The court noted that some colleges went further and admitted students even beyond the 10+5 per cent relaxation, in violation of Dental Council of India norms. *—PTI*

1 lakh PUC applications received in 3 days in Delhi

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

More than one lakh vehicle owners applied for Pollution Under Control (PUC) certificates over the past three days amid intensified enforcement against polluting vehicles in the national capital, even as Delhi's air quality edged closer to the 'severe' category on Saturday.

Visibility plunged across parts of the city in the morning. The overall air quality index (AQI) stood at 384, nearing the 'severe' mark. The lowest visibility till 8.30 am was recorded at Safdarjung at 200 metres, followed by Palam at 350 metres. Out of 40 air quality monitoring stations across Delhi, 16 recorded 'severe' air quality, while 24 were in the 'very poor' category.

Delhi Transport and Health Minister Pankaj Kumar Singh said transport-related emissions contribute around 20–25 per cent to the city's pollution. Officials of the Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC) and police have been deployed at petrol pumps, with cameras being used to monitor vehicles. First-time violators are being warned, while repeat offenders face challans. End-of-life vehicles, as per Supreme Court directions, are being turned back. To curb pollution, a ban on non-Delhi private vehicles below BS-VI norms and enforcement of the 'No PUC, No Fuel' rule came into force on Thursday. Singh said the chief minister and the entire cabinet are working on a comprehensive policy for Delhi, which will be announced soon. *—PTI*

GOA CLUB FIRE

Blue Corner Notice likely against Khosla who fled to UK

PANAJI, 20 DEC

Goa Police have initiated the process to secure a Blue Corner Notice through central agencies against British national Surinder Kumar Khosla, an accused in the 6 December nightclub fire in which 25 people were killed, officials said on Saturday. Khosla is believed to be one of the owners of the 'Birch by Romeo Lane' nightclub in Arpora, where the massive fire broke out on the night of December 6. A senior police officer said Khosla was present in Goa at the time of the incident and is suspected to have fled to the United Kingdom, likely the following day.

"We have started the process to issue him a blue corner notice to bring him from the UK. Formalities required to be completed with Central agencies are being initiated," the officer added. "Khosla was in Goa when the fire occurred. However, he later fled to the UK, probably on the next day (7 December)," the police officer said. Police have so far arrested eight people, including the nightclub owners Saurabh Luthra, Gaurav Luthra, and Ajay Gupta, and five others *—PTI*

JAWAN ARRESTED FOR 'RAPING' WOMAN IN RANCHI

RANCHI/BALLIA, 20 DEC

An Army jawan, 42, was arrested in Jharkhand's Ranchi for allegedly raping a 22-year-old woman at Tatisilwai railway station. The woman was waiting to board a train for Ranchi. According to the Railway Protection Force (RPF), the jawan was on duty guarding a defence logistics train and was allegedly in an inebriated state. Police said the jawan took the woman to an empty coach of a train and raped her.

An FIR has been registered and the jawan has been sent to judicial custody.

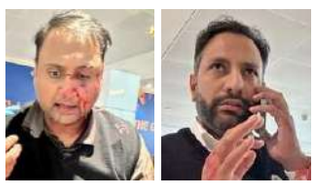
Police have arrested a 20-year-old daily wager from Bihar for allegedly abducting and raping a 12-year-old girl in Ballia, officials said on Saturday. The accused, who was arrested from his home in Bihar's Sheohar district on Friday, has been sent to judicial custody, SP Omvir Singh said.

According to police, the accused lived in the Ballia Kotwali area and worked as a daily wager.

He allegedly abducted the girl and raped her on 9 April. Based on a complaint filed by the girl's father, a case was registered against the accused at the Ballia City Kotwali under the relevant provisions of the BNS and the POCSO Act, police said. *—PTI*

No plaint yet: Cops on pilot assault

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC



Delhi Police on Saturday said they have not received any formal complaint regarding the alleged assault of a passenger by an off-duty Air India Express pilot at the city airport, linked to a dispute over alleged queue-jumping at the security checkpoint. Clarifying a post on X by the complainant, Ankit Dewan, alleged on Friday that he was physically assaulted by Air India Express captain, Virender Sejwal, near the security area of Terminal 1. He claimed that the incidentleft him bleeding, which traumatised his seven-year-old daughter who witnessed the altercation, but neither the complainant nor the airline has so far approached the police.

According to Dewan, the dispute broke out after he objected to some staff members allegedly cutting the queue at the security checkpoint. He claimed the pilot abused him verbally before assaulting him physically.

Air India Express had earlier said it was aware of the incident involving one of its employees, who was travelling as a passenger on another airline, and that the pilot had been removed from official duties with immediate effect pending an internal investigation. Sources earlier said the off-duty pilot later boarded an IndiGo flight to Bengaluru after the incident. Police said no case has been registered so far in the absence of a formal complaint. *—PTI*

TRIBAL WOMAN, ONCE BONDED LABOUR, NOW SARPANCH IN TELANGANA

HYDERABAD, 20 DEC

From bonded labourer to village sarpanch, life has come full circle for Purusaala Lingamma, a Chenchu tribal woman elected to lead Amaragiri village in Telangana's Nagarkurnool district.

In her 40s and illiterate, Lingamma spent decades working as bonded labour in the Nallamala forests after being trapped in debt from childhood. She was rescued by government officials several years ago.

"We were not even aware how much loan we owed them," she told PTI. "They got us fishing nets and we had to go fishing. We did not even have food to eat in those days." Lingamma said the bonded labour began with her parents, and entire families were forced to fish in return for nets provided by their exploiters. Amaragiri, a village of about 300 people, was reserved for Scheduled Tribes in the recent Gram Panchayat elections. Residents encouraged Lingamma to contest after she became known for her work on welfare issues. *—PTI*

FROM OUTSIDER TO ICON

Sreenivasan: The man who reshaped Malayalam cinema

KOCHI, 20 DEC

Born in Pattiam near Thalassery in Kerala's Kannur district, Sreenivasan was the son of a schoolteacher and a homemaker. His interest in cinema emerged early, eventually leading him to formal training at the Film and Television Institute of Tamil Nadu in Chennai after completing his graduation.

He made his acting debut in 1977 with PA Backer's 'Manimu zhakkam', beginning a career that spanned nearly five decades. Over time, he evolved into one of Malayalam cinema's most versatile figures, an actor, screenplay writer, director and producer whose influence extended far beyond the screen.

Sreenivasan turned what the industry once viewed as limitations — his dark complexion and short stature, into defining strengths, creating unforgettable characters such as Appakala in 'Thenmavin Kombathu', Maruthu in 'Oru Maravathoor Kanavu' and Shanmughan in 'Megham'.

- Sreenivasan also co-produced films including 'Kathaparayumbol' and 'Thattathin Marayathu'.

His comic roles in films like 'Nadodikkattu', 'Pattanap ravesham' and 'Akkare Akkare Akkare' remain cult favourites.

Equally compelling were his negative and emotionally layered roles, including Viswanath in 'Mukundetta Sumitra Vilikkunnu', Musa in 'Kalapani', Thattan Bhaskaran in 'Ponmu ttayidunna Tharavu', Balan in 'Kathaparayumbol' and Cuba Mukundan in 'Arabikkatha'. He consistently challenged stereotypes, notably in the path-breaking film 'Passenger'.

As a writer, his collaborations with filmmakers Sathyan Anthikkad and Priyadarshan produced some of Malayalam cinema's most enduring works. His political satire 'Sandesham' (1991) remains a landmark, dissecting Kerala's polarised political culture with biting wit. As a director, 'Vadakkuno kkiyantram' (1989) and 'Chintha vishtayaya Shyamala' (1998) earned critical acclaim and major awards.

Sreenivasan also co-produced successful films including 'Kathaparayumbol' and 'Thattathin Marayathu'. In later years, he turned to organic farming and public commentary, occasionally courting controversy. Though he had stepped away from films due to health issues, he remained a widely discussed public figure.

Awarded multiple national and state honours, Sreenivasan leaves behind a body of work that reshaped Malayalam cinema's moral, political and emotional vocabulary. *—PTI*

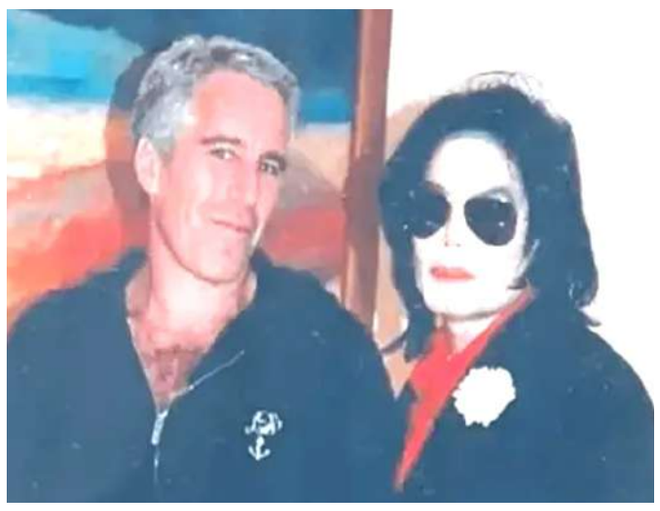
The 2-decade-long fight to release the Epstein files

Two decades after Jeffrey Epstein was first reported to police, the Justice Department has started to release its investigative files on the late millionaire, who was accused of repeatedly sexually abusing underage girls.

Enacted last month, the Epstein Files Transparency Act requires disclosure of government records on Epstein and his longtime confidant Ghislaine Maxwell by Friday — though it's possible more records will be released on a rolling basis.

Among questions surrounding the release: how much light the documents shed on Epstein's crimes, his interactions with influential friends in business, politics and academia and whether anything in the documents will support — or debunk — one accuser's claims that other powerful men participated in or knew about Epstein's misconduct.

Here is a timeline of the Epstein investigations



One of 68 photographs released from the estate of convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein shows pop star Michael Jackson posing with him, while another image shows Ghislaine Maxwell looking on as Britain's Prince Andrew lies on the laps of women **PHOTO: US JUSTICS DEPT**

The investigation begins

March 2005: Police begin investigating Epstein after the family of a 14-year-old girl reports she was molested at his mansion in Palm Beach, Florida. Multiple underage girls, many of them high school students, would later tell police Epstein hired them to give sexual massages.

May 2006: Palm Beach police officials sign paperwork to charge Epstein with multiple counts of unlawful sex with a minor, but the county's top prosecutor, State Attorney Barry Krischer, takes the unusual step of sending the case to a grand jury.

July 2006: Epstein is arrested after a grand jury indicts him on a count of soliciting prostitution. The relatively minor charge upsets Palm Beach police leaders, who publicly accuse Krischer of giving Epstein special treatment. The FBI begins an investigation.

2007: Federal prosecutors prepare an indictment, but for a year Epstein's lawyers engage in talks with the US attorney in Miami, Alexander Acosta, about a deal that would avoid a federal prosecution. Epstein's lawyers decry his accusers as unreliable.

SECRET DEAL LEADS TO A LIGHT JAIL TERM

June 2008: Epstein pleads guilty to state charges: one count of soliciting prostitution and one count of soliciting prostitution from someone under the age of 18. He is sentenced to 18 months in jail. Under a secret arrangement, the US attorney's office agrees not to prosecute Epstein for federal crimes. Epstein serves most of his sentence in a work release program that allows him to leave jail during the day.

May 2009: One of Epstein's accusers, Virginia Roberts Giuffre, files a lawsuit claiming Epstein and Maxwell arranged for her to have sexual encounters with "royalty, politicians, academicians, businessmen" and others.

The lawsuit doesn't name the men.

July 2009: Epstein is released from jail. For the next decade, Epstein's accusers wage a legal fight to get his federal non-prosecution agreement voided.

NEWS MEDIA AND LAWSUITS KEEP PUBLIC INTEREST HIGH

2 March, 2011: The Daily Mail publishes an interview with Giuffre in which she describes travelling with Epstein to London at age 17 and spending a night dancing with Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, then known as Prince Andrew. The story and a photo of the prince with his arm around Giuffre creates a crisis for the royal family. FBI agents subsequently interview Giuffre.

20 December, 2014: Giuffre's lawyers file court papers claiming she had sexual encounters with Mountbatten-Windsor and other men, including "foreign presidents, a well-known Prime Minister, and other world leaders." All those men deny the allegations.

November 2018: The Miami Herald revisits the handling of Epstein's case in a series of stories focusing partly on the role of Acosta — who by this point is President Donald Trump's labour secretary. The coverage intensifies public interest in Epstein.

PROSECUTORS REVIVE CASE

6 July, 2019: Epstein is arrested on sex trafficking charges after federal prosecutors in New York conclude they aren't bound by the terms of the earlier non-prosecution deal. Days later, Acosta resigns as labor secretary.

10 August, 2019: Epstein kills himself in his jail cell in New York.

2 July, 2020: Federal prosecutors in New York charge Maxwell with sex crimes, saying she helped recruit and abuse Epstein's victims.

30 December, 2021: After a monthlong trial, a jury convicts Maxwell of sex trafficking and other crimes.

28 June, 2022: Maxwell is sentenced to 20 years in prison.

January, 2024: Public interest in the Epstein case surges again after a judge makes more court records public in a related lawsuit. Conspiracy theories flourish, pushed by people who believe Epstein ran an international sex traffic network that served rich and powerful men.

A new president and a fresh political crisis

10 January, 2025: Trump, who was friends and neighbours with Epstein for years, becomes president again. During his 2024 campaign, he had suggested that he'd seek to open more government files on Epstein.

February 2025: Attorney General Pam Bondi suggests in a Fox News Channel interview that an Epstein "client list" is sitting on her desk. The Justice Department distributes binders marked "declassified" to far-right influencers, but much of the information had long been public.

25 APRIL, 2025: GIUFFRE DIES BY 'SUICIDE'

7 July, 2025: The Justice Department says Epstein didn't maintain a "client list" and it won't make any more files related to his sex trafficking investigation public.

15 July, 2025: Reps. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., and Thomas Massie, R-Ky., introduce the Epstein Files Transparency Act.

17 July, 2025: The Wall Street Journal describes a sexually suggestive letter that the newspaper says bore Trump's name and was included in a 2003 album for Epstein's 50th birthday. Trump denies writing the letter and sues the newspaper.

24-25 July, 2025: In an effort to put a political crisis to rest, Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche interviews Maxwell. She denies wrongdoing and says she never saw Trump involved in any sexually inappropriate activity. Afterward, she is moved from a low-security prison in Florida to a minimum-security prison camp in Texas.

A PRINCE LOSES HIS ROYAL TITLE

21 October, 2025: Giuffre's posthumous memoir is published. In it, she revisits her claims that Epstein and Maxwell sexually trafficked her to powerful men, including Mountbatten-Windsor.

30 October, 2025: King Charles III strips Mountbatten-Windsor of his remaining titles, meaning he can no longer be referred to as "prince," and evicts him from his royal residence.

12 November, 2025: A House committee releases a trove of email correspondence between Epstein and others, including Mountbatten-Windsor, Trump ally Steve Bannon, ex-Treasury Secretary Larry Summers and LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman. In one 2019 email to a journalist, Epstein wrote that Trump "knew about the girls" but didn't explain what he meant by that.

14 November, 2025: At Trump's urging, Bondi announces that the US attorney in Manhattan will investigate Epstein's ties to some of the Republican president's political foes, including former President Bill Clinton, a Democrat; Summers; and Hoffman, a prominent Democratic donor. None of those men has been accused of misconduct by Epstein's victims.

18 November, 2025: Congress passes the Epstein Files Transparency Act. Trump signs it into law the next day.

19 December, 2025: The Justice Department begins releasing records. *—PTI*

SALAR ساڈا

Bird flu is testing lessons we failed to learn from Covid

There is an unwritten rule in publishing, or so I am told: don't write about Covid. Our collective attention span was exhausted by those months holed up in attics and cramped flats, staring at a world we could no longer enter. When the worst passed, we wanted to shut that chapter, to padlock it behind a heavy latch.

But in doing so, we also locked away the hard-won lessons of that time: how quickly systems buckle, how decades of warnings can be ignored, and how the very institutions meant to protect us can become the scaffolding for the next disaster.

That matters now, as another threat quietly takes shape: highly pathogenic avian influenza, better known as bird flu.

The risk of sustained human-to-human transmission remains low. That does not make the virus harmless. H5 strains are devastatingly lethal to birds: more than nine million have died outright, and hundreds of millions have been culled to contain outbreaks. More alarming is the virus's expanding reach into mammals. At least 74 species, from elephant seals to polar bears, have experienced mass die-offs.

These cases are not isolated. They sit within a broader ecological shift. Dense poultry farming creates ideal conditions for viruses to jump species. In the United States, more than 1,000 dairy herds have tested positive in the past two years. Viral fragments have even been detected in milk, a troubling potential route for spillover. Every jump is a biological experiment, probing for new footholds.

Europe is seeing a surge too. Between early September and mid-November 2025, 1,444 infected wild birds were detected across 26 countries, four times the number recorded a year earlier.

Human cases remain rare but deadly. Since 2003, there have been just 992 confirmed H5N1 infections worldwide, but with a fatality rate close to 50 per cent. The numbers, however, are rising. The Americas have logged 75 cases since 2022, and in November the US recorded its first death from H5N5, involving a patient with underlying health conditions. Europe has yet to report a human case, but the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control has warned that widespread circulation in animals raises the risk of spillover.

My research examines how warnings collapse before catastrophe, from intelligence failures and industrial accidents to geopolitical shocks. The pattern is strikingly consistent. Frontline observers spot danger early, but the signal weakens as it travels upwards, diluted by bureaucracy, competing interpretations or institutional forgetfulness.

The recent Hong Kong fire is a tragic example. Residents of Wang Fuk Court repeatedly raised alarms about flammable styrofoam boards, uncertified netting and ignored safety notices long before the blaze. Those warnings never gained traction.

Across disasters, the blind spots repeat: weak signals drowned out by noise, bureaucratic habits that soften uncomfortable messages, and political instincts to downplay risks that threaten established narratives. Warning is a chain, stretching from detection to decision. Failure is rarely total, some links hold. Others jam precisely when they are needed most.

Bird flu now sits within such a chain. The technical capacity to detect change exists. Veterinarians, virologists and surveillance systems are sequencing viruses and logging outbreaks. But the infrastructure meant to catch early warning signals is fraying. Agencies tasked with monitoring pandemic threats have been hollowed out by budget cuts and staff losses.

A study of 31 European nations found that COVID exposed a "critical gap in preparedness", calling for standardised indicators and open data as the backbone of future responses. The EU's new pre-pandemic plan is a step forward, but it cannot compensate for persistent weaknesses in routine monitoring and response.

Across the Atlantic, US scientists warn that federal reporting has slowed. The Department of Agriculture shared too little genetic data from outbreaks in cattle and other animals, released it late and in unusable formats. Researchers were left unable to track how the virus was evolving or spreading.

In the UK, domestic surveillance has also been strained. Reduced access to European disease intelligence and chronic veterinary shortages have weakened early detection.

When signals fade inside institutions, they fade for the public too. A recent poll shows most Americans do not even see bird flu as a credible threat. That is compounded by the fact that human infections can be mild: one recent case in a dairy worker presented as little more than conjunctivitis.

None of this means a new pandemic is imminent. Health authorities still judge the risk of efficient human transmission to be low. We are better prepared than we were before Covid, with vaccine candidates, clearer protocols and hard-earned experience.

But low risk is not no risk. And if such a shift occurred, the consequences could be catastrophic. Most people have some immunity to seasonal flu strains; we likely have none to H5. Influenza, unlike Covid, has historically killed healthy adults in large numbers. *—PTI*

Europe is seeing a surge too. Between early September and mid-November 2025, 1,444 infected wild birds were detected across 26 countries, four times the number recorded in 2024 **PHOTO: PIXABAY**

LETTERS write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

Famine averted in Gaza but Palestinians still face starvation

The spread of famine in the Gaza Strip has been averted, but the situation remains critical, with the entire Palestinian territory still facing the risk of starvation, the world's leading authority on food crises said on Friday.

A new report by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) said there were "notable improvements" in food security and nutrition following an October ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war, and that no famine is currently detected in Gaza. However, the IPC warned that conditions remain "highly fragile", with nearly 2,000 people projected to face catastrophic levels of hunger through April.

In a worst-case scenario — including a collapse of the ceasefire and a halt to humanitarian aid — the entire Gaza Strip could again slide into famine, the report said, stressing that needs remain immense and that sustained, expanded and unhindered aid is required.

The findings mark a shift from earlier IPC assessments. In August, the group confirmed famine for the first time in the Middle East, saying conditions in Gaza City had reached catastrophic levels and warning that famine could spread south to Deir al-Balah and Khan Younis. At the time, more than 500,000 people — about a quarter of Gaza's population — were facing extreme hunger, with many at risk of dying from malnutrition-related causes.

Friday's report said the spread of famine had been offset by a significant reduction in hostilities, a proposed peace framework and improved access for humanitarian and commercial food deliveries.

"There is more food on the ground," Antoine Renard, the World Food Programme's director for the Palestinian territories, told UN reporters in a video briefing from Gaza City on Thursday. "People now have two meals a day, up from one meal in July. This is clearly a reversal of what had been one of the most dire situations during the summer."

Still, Renard warned that conditions remain precarious, with shelter now the most urgent challenge. Aid agencies say nearly 1.3 million Palestinians require emergency shelter as winter sets in, many living in flooded or waterlogged tents.

ISRAELI REJECTION

Israel strongly rejected the IPC's findings. COGAT, the Israeli military agency responsible for coordinating aid to Gaza, said it adheres to the ceasefire and allows the agreed volume of assistance to enter the strip.

Palestinian children play next to tents in a makeshift camp for displaced people set up on the beach in Gaza City **PHOTO: PTI**

Aid quantities "significantly exceed the nutritional requirements of the population" under accepted international methodologies, including those used by the United Nations, COGAT said.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry also dismissed the report, saying it did not reflect reality on the ground and that more than the required amount of aid was reaching Gaza. The ministry argued that the IPC relies primarily on data from UN trucks, which it said represent only about 20 per cent of all aid deliveries.

The IPC disputed that claim, saying its analysis includes both commercial and UN trucks and is based on data from the UN and COGAT itself.

Israel has rejected previous IPC findings, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu earlier describing one report as an "outright lie".

CEASEFIRE UNCERTAINTY

The report comes as a fragile, US-brokered ceasefire between Israel and Hamas reaches a critical juncture. Phase One of the truce is nearing completion, with the remains of one hostage still believed to be held in Gaza. Negotiations over a more complex second phase have yet to begin, and both sides have accused the other of violating the agreement.

While food availability has improved, the IPC stressed that the risk of renewed famine remains acute. Displacement is a key driver of food insecurity, with more than 70 per cent of Gaza's population living in makeshift shelters and dependent on aid. Poor sanitation, hygiene and uneven access to food continue to exacerbate hunger. Although humanitarian access has improved compared with earlier periods, the IPC said it fluctuates daily and remains limited and uneven across the territory.

To prevent further loss of life, the group's experts called for expanded humanitarian assistance, including food, fuel, shelter and healthcare. They warned that over the next 12 months more than 100,000 children aged between six months and five years are expected to suffer acute malnutrition and require treatment.

AID STILL FALLING SHORT

Israeli military figures suggest the country has not consistently met the ceasefire provision of allowing 600 aid trucks into Gaza each day, though Israel disputes that assessment. US officials involved in coordinating aid deliveries say shipments have reached agreed levels. UN Secretary-General António Guterres said the UN and its partners are preparing 1.5 million hot meals daily and delivering food packages throughout Gaza, but cautioned that "needs are growing faster than aid can get in".

Aid groups say that despite increased assistance, food and essential supplies are still not reaching everyone in need after more than two years of war. "This is not a debate about truck numbers or calories on paper," said Bushra Khalidi, Oxfam's policy lead for Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory. "It's about whether people can actually access food, clean water, shelter and healthcare safely and consistently. Right now, they cannot."Even where food is available, many Palestinians say they cannot afford it. "There is food and meat, but no one has money," said Hany al-Shamali, who was displaced from Gaza City. "How can we live?" *—PTI*

US restricts visas for 2 Honduran election officials

TEGUCIGALPA, 20 DEC

The Trump administration restricted visas for two leftist Honduran election officials, citing interference in the Central American country's special vote count. The US State Department said in a statement Friday it revoked the visa of Mario Morazán, a magistrate of the Electoral Justice Tribunal, and denied a visa application from Marlon Ochoa, a member of the National Electoral Council. Both belong to the leftist ruling LIBRE, or Liberty and Refoundation, party. "The United States will not tolerate actions that undermine our national security and our region's stability," the statement said. This is the latest example of the Trump administration weighing in on Honduran affairs throughout the election. *—PTI*

IMF approves $206M for Lanka's cyclone recovery

COLOMBO, 20 DEC

The IMF has approved an emergency funding of USD 206 million under its rapid finance instrument to help Sri Lanka "address the urgent needs arising from the catastrophic Cyclone Ditwah and preserve macroeconomic stability". In a statement issued on Friday, the Washington-based International Monetary Fund (IMF) said the disaster has created urgent humanitarian and reconstruction needs, generating significant fiscal pressures. The IMF said a "mission team will visit Sri Lanka in early 2026 to resume discussions." Hours before the IMF decision, the parliament here approved without a vote a supplementary estimate of LKR 500 billion required to restore the livelihood of displaced families. *—PTI*

PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

Erika Kirk endorses JD Vance for 2028 presidential run

PHOENIX, 20 DEC

Erika Kirk, widow of Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk and the organisation's new leader, backs presidential bid by Vice President JD Vance on the opening night of the conservative youth group's annual conference. Stating that Turning Point would help keep Congress in Republican hands next year, she said, "We are going to get my husband's friend JD Vance elected for 48 in the most resounding way possible." Kirk's statement on Thursday is the most explicit backing of Vance's possible candidacy by a woman who was positioned as a steward to her late husband's legacy. Charlie Kirk had become a powerbroker and bridge builder within the conservative movement before he was assassinated in September. *—PTI*

Bolsonaro granted bail for hernia surgery

SAO PAULO, 20 DEC

Brazil's former president, Jair Bolsonaro, has been granted temporary permission to leave prison for hernia surgery, although the date has not been set. Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes approved the request after federal police doctors confirmed the procedure is necessary, as the hernia affects both groins and causes him pain. Bolsonaro, in office from 2019 to 2022, has undergone several surgeries since being stabbed at a 2018 campaign rally. He is serving a 27-year sentence for attempting a coup following his 2022 election defeat, including plans to kill President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Vice President Geraldo Alckmin, and de Moraes. De Moraes denied his request for house arrest after the hospital stay. He is held under strict conditions in Brasília. *—PTI*

US releases 'heavily redacted' Epstein files

Clinton, Micheal Jackson & Mick Jagger star in new photos

WASHINGTON, 20 DEC

The Justice Department released thousands of files Friday about convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein but the incomplete document dump did not break significant ground about the long-running criminal investigations of the financier or his ties to wealthy and powerful individuals.

The files included a small number of photos of President Donald Trump, sparing the White House for now from having to confront fresh revelations about an Epstein relationship.

It did, however, feature a series of never-before-seen photos of Bill Clinton from a trip that the former president appears to have taken with Epstein decades ago. Other notable figures include musicians Mick Jagger and Michael Jackson, actor-comedian Chris Tucker, and Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor.

Notably, being associated with Epstein or his associate Ghislaine Maxwell is not a charge of guilt.

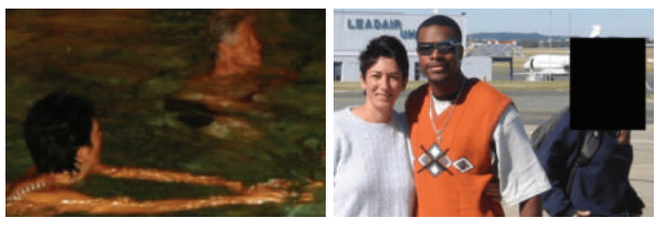
Reaction to the disclosures broke along mostly partisan lines. Democrats and some Republicans seized on the limited release to accuse the Justice Department of failing to meet a congressionally set deadline to produce the Epstein files.

However, senior White House officials reposted photos of Clinton.

The records, consisting largely of pictures but also including call logs, grand jury testimony, interview transcripts and other documents, arrived amid extraordinary anticipation that they might offer the most detailed look yet at nearly two decades worth of government scrutiny of Epstein's sexual abuse of young women and underage girls.

Their release has long been demanded by the public. But, replete with redactions, the new files seem unlikely to satisfy the public clamour for information given how many investigative records the department indicated it was continuing to withhold.

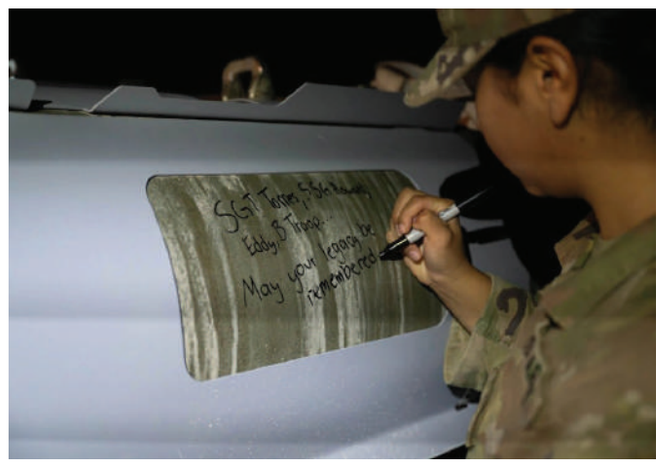
Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche wrote that the Justice Department was continuing to review files in its possession and expected additional disclosures by the end of the year. The department also said it was withholding some documents under exemptions allowed in the law and was redacting names of victims. *—PTI*



Jefferey Epstein; former president Bill Clinton with Ghislaine Maxwell in a tub; actor-comedian Chris Tucker *PHOTO: WH*

TRUMP'S NAME HARDLY APPEARS IN NEW EPSTEIN FILES

Trump's name is rarely mentioned in the batch of Jeffrey Epstein files that his Justice Department released on Friday, based on a preliminary New York Times scan of thousands of documents and hundreds of photographs. Trump and Epstein were close friends for years and the Republicans initial refusal to release federal files related to investigations into Epstein sparked speculation about whether those files featured him. Most of the new images of Trump were already public.



70 sites in Syria were struck by US, which said it was targeting IS infrastructure *PHOTO: X*

US carries out strike against IS in Syria

WASHINGTON, 20 DEC

The US launched military strikes in Syria to "eliminate" Islamic State group fighters and weapons sites in retaliation for an ambush attack that killed two US troops and an American interpreter last week. The "large-scale" attack hit 70 targets across central Syria on Friday.

Neither side confirmed the death toll. A US official said more strikes should be expected.

The attack was conducted using F-15 Eagle jets, A-10 Thunderbolt ground attack aircraft and AH-64 Apache helicopters, the officials said. F-16 fighter jets from Jordan and HIMARS rocket artillery also were used.

"This is not the beginning of a war — it is a declaration of vengeance. The USA, under President (Donald) Trump's leadership, will never hesitate and never relent to defend our people," Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth said on social media.

Trump, who had earlier vower retaliation, said the strikes were targeting IS "strongholds."

He reiterated his support for Syrian President Ahmad Al-Sharaa, who he said was "fully in support" of the US effort to target the militant group.

"All terrorists who are evil enough to attack Americans are hereby warned — YOU WILL BE HIT HARDER THAN YOU HAVE EVER BEEN HIT BEFORE IF YOU, IN ANY WAY, ATTACK OR THREATEN THE USA," the President added.

The strikes come as ties between the US and Syria have markedly improved following the ouster of autocratic leader Bashar Assad a year ago.

After the US' strikes, Syria's foreign ministry said in a statement that last week's attack "underscores the urgent necessity of strengthening international cooperation to combat terrorism in all its forms". *—PTI*

The Russian missile launch hit a bus full of people in Ukraine's Odesa and damaged the nearby trucks *PHOTO: UKRAINE GOVT*

Russian strikes on Ukraine kill 8, hurt 27

KYIV, 20 DEC

Eight people were killed and 27 wounded in a Russian missile strike on port infrastructure in Odesa, southern Ukraine, late on Friday, Ukraine's Emergency Service said.

Some of the wounded were on a bus at the epicentre of the overnight strike. Trucks caught fire in the parking lot, and cars were also damaged. The port was struck with ballistic missiles, said Oleh Kiper, the head of the Odesa region.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian forces hit a vessel of the Russian "shadow fleet" off the coast of Libya on Friday.

The vessel - the Qendil - was empty when it was struck by drones in neutral waters more than 2,000 km (1,250 miles) from Ukraine, sustaining critical damage, the official at the SBU security service said in a written statement.

A drilling platform at the Filanovsky oil and gas field in the Caspian Sea was also hit. The facility is operated by Russian oil giant Lukoil. Ukrainian drones also struck a radar system in the Krasnosilske area of Crimea, which Russia illegally annexed from Ukraine in 2014.

Meanwhile, Kremlin envoy Kirill Dmitriev, is set to meet with Trump's envoy Steve Witkoff and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner in Miami on Saturday to discuss the US peace deal.

The US and Ukrainian delegations met recently to discuss the deal. *—Agencies*

July uprising leader laid to rest in Dhaka as peace holds

DHAKA, 20 DEC

- Violence broke out Thursday night after news of July Uprising leader Hadi spread. He was shot when he launched his election and died six days later

Bangladesh held the funeral of prominent youth leader Sharif Osman Hadi on Saturday drawing a large number of people in the capital amid extra-tight security after his death triggered unrest across the country.

Interim government Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus along with his advisory council members and Army chief General Waker-uz-Zaman attended the funeral for the 32-year-old spokesperson of 'Inqilab Mancha' held at the South Plaza of Parliament complex at Manik Mia Avenue.

Yunus spoke briefly ahead of the janaza (funeral prayers) even as politicians representing former prime minister Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Jamaat-e-Islami and student-led National Citizen Party (NCP) joined the prayers.

The country is also observing a day of state mourning following the death of Hadi, who was one of the prominent leaders of the student-led protests last year, which led to the ouster of prime minister Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government - known as the July Uprising.

A candidate for the scheduled 12 February general elections, Hadi was shot in the head on 12 December by masked gunmen as he initiated his election campaign in Dhaka. He died while undergoing treatment in Singapore on Thursday.

Police allowed tens of thousands of people to join the funeral prayers and ahead of the ritual. *—PTI*

Thousands of people offer funeral prayers for leading Bangladeshi activist Sharif Osman Hadi in Dhaka, Bangladesh on Saturday *PHOTO: PTI*

Israel guns down 5 in Gaza

DEIR AL-BALAH, 20 DEC

Israeli troops fired across the ceasefire line in the northern Gaza Strip on Friday, resulting in the deaths of at least five Palestinians, including a baby, according to Shifa Hospital in Gaza City. Rami Mhanna, the hospital's managing director, reported the incident occurred in the Tuffah neighbourhood as the fragile Israel-Hamas truce has faced increasing difficulties.

The Israeli military stated that troops targeted "a number of suspicious individuals... in command structures west of the Yellow Line," and noted that the incident is under review, expressing regret for any harm to uninvolved individuals.

The Yellow Line, established under a US-brokered ceasefire in October, separates the Israeli-controlled areas from the rest of Gaza. Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump's envoy, Steve Witkoff, was set to host Middle Eastern officials in Florida to mediate the ongoing ceasefire negotiations.

While the initial phase of the ceasefire, enacted in October, has largely held, accusations of violations from both sides abound. The second phase will address more complex issues, including the deployment of an international force and Hamas' disarmament. *—PTI*

TOSHAKHANA 2 CORRUPTION CASE

Imran, wife sentenced to 17 years in jail

ISLAMABAD, 20 DEC

Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi were sentenced to 17 years in jail by a court on Saturday in the Toshakhana 2 corruption case.

Khan, 73, has been in jail since August 2023, and faces cases filed against him after his removal from power in April 2022. The Toshakhana 2 case involves alleged fraud regarding gifts which the former first couple received from the Saudi government in 2021.

Special court judge Shahrukh Arjumand announced the judgment in Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail, where the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf founder is being held.

Khan and Bushra were awarded 10 years' rigorous imprisonment under Section 409 (criminal breach of trust) of the Pakistan Penal Code and seven years under the Prevention of Corruption Act.

The court also imposed a fine of PKR 16.4 million on each of them.

Khan and Bushra were present in court when the judgement was announced.

Khan, in his recorded statement under Section 342 of the CrPC in the case, had rejected the allegations.

He alleged that the case was "fabricated and politically driven."

The case was filed in July 2024 and was based on allegations that valuable items, including expensive watches, as well as diamond and gold jewellery, were sold by the couple without depositing them in the Toshakhana.

The Toshakhana is a department under the Cabinet Division that stores gifts given to rulers and government officials by heads of other governments and foreign dignitaries. Once deposited, the gifts can be bought back as per rules.

Both convicts can approach the High Court against their convictions. *—PTI*

Imran Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi *PHOTO: X*

NEPAL PM DISMISSES RUMOURS OF ELECTION POSTPONEMENT

KATHMANDU, 20 DEC

Nepal's Interim Prime Minister Sushila Karki has rejected claims that attempts are being made to postpone the elections slated for March 2026.

Addressing the nation on the completion of 100 days of her six-month tenure, which ends after the elections, Karki reiterated that the polls will be held on the stipulated date.

In a recorded address to the nation released on Saturday, the Nepal Premier described the March election as the only way to provide stability.

"Many have been asking, 'Is the country really heading towards elections? Can the government guarantee peace?' Today, from this platform, I want to make it clear to the country and the world, that the election to the House of Representatives to be held on 21 Falgun 2082 (5 March 2026) is no longer just an agenda; it is the only sure way to provide stability to our country. I want to assure you that rumours of postponing or cancelling the elections are baseless," Karki said. *—ANI*

Interim Prime Minister Sushila Karki *PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA*

PHOTO: PTI

Gold, silver to shine brightly in 2026, says report

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

Gold, which has remained to be one of the strongest performing assets of 2025, is projected to maintain a "moderately to strongly positive" outlook into 2026, according to a report by financial advisory firm PL Capital. Gold prices have surged over 60 per cent thus far in 2025, driven by record global demand of 1,313 tonnes in the July-September quarter. Similarly, silver has outperformed gold, rising over 100 per cent this year to surpass USD 60 per ounce. The report notes, "Supply remains in structural deficit, reinforcing the strong outlook for 2026." With a supportive economic environment in India, including a recent RBI rate cut, PL Capital favours sectors like banks, consumer staples, and defence for 2026. —*ANI*

Fortis to acquire Bengaluru hospital for Rs 430 cr

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

Fortis Healthcare on Saturday said it has signed a pact to acquire Bengaluru-based People Tree Hospital for Rs 430 crore. The company has signed definitive agreements for the acquisition of the 100 per cent stakes in 125-bedded hospital in Yeshwanthpur in Bengaluru. The said acquisition would be undertaken by Fortis' wholly-owned subsidiary International Hospital Limited (IHL), it said in a statement. The healthcare provider said an additional investment of Rs 410 crore is planned over the next three years in the facility to further enhance infrastructure. "The acquisition is in line with our vision to expand our footprint in focused clusters," Fortis' CEO Ashutosh Raghuvanshi explained. —*PTI*

IIM Nagpur, ONGC sign MoU on green energy research

NAGPUR, 20 DEC

IM-N and ONGC Green Limited signed a Memorandum of Understanding to collaborate on research, capacity building, and policy initiatives in green and future energy. The agreement was signed by IIM-N director Bhimaraya Metri and ONGC Green COO Harsh Nupur Joshi. The two institutions will work on environmental sustainability and ESG frameworks, renewable energy integration, carbon and green credit markets, energy storage, e-mobility policies, and leadership development. According to Metri, the collaboration will combine IIM-N's academic and expertise with ONGC Green's operational experience in renewable energy —*PTI*

SEBI fines four with Rs 50 lakh for share manipulation

New Delhi, 20 Dec

The SEBI has imposed a penalty of Rs 50 lakh on four individuals Manish Mishra, Sunil Bhandari, Rekha Bhandari and Anshu Mishra for manipulation of the shares of GG Engineering Ltd. In an order, SEBI's Adjudicating officer Amit Kapoor said "I observe that Manish Mishra, in collusion with Anshu Mishra, Rekha Bhandari, Sunil Bhandari, engaged in a coordinated scheme to induce investors to acquire securities of GGENG (GG Engineering) through uploading false misleading videos on the YouTube Channels."

As a part of the scheme, they created artificial volumes in the script of GGENGG. Further... Rekha Bhandari and Sunil Bhandari indulged in order spoofing, thereby leading to creation of misleading appearance of trading in the shares of GGENG. —*PTI*

Oil comeback in 2025 puts India at centre stage

World maybe pivoting to oil, despite Russia-Ukraine war

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

After years of forecasts predicting an imminent peak in oil demand amid a rapid shift to renewables, oil and gas made a quiet but unmistakable comeback in 2025, with India emerging as a central driver of global consumption.

Major energy outlooks from BP, McKinsey and the International Energy Agency pushed peak oil into the 2030s and revised 2050 demand estimates upward. All major forecasters agreed that India would be the epicentre of global demand growth, with its rise in energy consumption outpacing that of China and Southeast Asia combined.

The revival of the "oil is king" narrative was driven by policy delays, infrastructure bottlenecks and geopolitical tensions.

European nations leaned more heavily on fossil fuels as supply shortfalls and high prices persisted amid the Russia-Ukraine war, while US President Donald Trump's fossil-friendly policies reinforced the trend.

Revival of the 'oil is king' narrative was driven by policy delays, infrastructure bottlenecks and geopolitical tensions - PHOTO: PTI

India's oil and gas sector in 2025 reflected shifting import patterns, policy reforms, rising demand and efforts to strengthen energy security. The country remained heavily dependent on crude imports, with Russian oil accounting for more than a third of supplies for most of the year, despite US pressure to cut purchases and the imposition of a 50 per cent tariff on Indian goods.

Imports dipped only after sanctions on Russian exporters Rosneft and Lukoil in late November, falling below 1 million barrels per day from 1.7–1.8 million bpd.

Domestic policy shifts included the notification of the Petroleum and Natural Gas Rules, 2025, introducing a modern regulatory framework to attract investment and simplify licensing for exploration and production.

On the price front, 2025 emerged as one of the calmest years in recent oil market memory. Brent crude traded largely in a narrow band between the low-USD 60s and low-USD 70s per barrel for most of the year, before easing to around USD 59-60 by mid-December, without the sharp spikes that typically define oil cycles.

Demand trends remained robust, with India's oil consumption projected to grow faster than China's in 2025 and forecasts showing the country set to account for a significant share of global oil demand growth through the next decade. —*PTI*

OVER MONEY LAUNDERING

ED grills Anil's son for 2nd day

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

- Anmol Ambani, 34, had his statements recorded under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) for the first time on Friday

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Saturday questioned Jai Anmol Ambani, son of industrialist Anil Ambani, for the second consecutive day in connection with a money laundering case linked to an alleged bank loan fraud.

Anmol Ambani, 34, had his statements recorded under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) for the first time on Friday, with the session continuing on Saturday.

The Reliance Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group has not responded to the development. The ED's probe is related to Yes Bank, which, according to officials, had an exposure of around Rs 6,000 crore in the Reliance Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group as of March 2017 which reportedly doubled to Rs 13,000 crore within a year.

Companies involved include, Reliance Home Finance Limited and Reliance Commercial Finance Limited.

A portion of these investments allegedly became non-performing, causing a loss of Rs 3,300 crore.

Anil has also been questioned by the ED in relation to the alleged bank loan fraud involving the Reliance Group companies. —*PTI*

NOTHING TO DISCLOSE: INFOSYS AFTER NYSE HALTS TRADING

MUMBAI, 20 DEC

Infosys clarified, after the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) paused its American Depositary Receipt (ADR) trading on 19 December. In an exchange filing, that there are no events that require disclosure under the SEBI Regulations, 2015.

Infosys ADR surged over 38 per cent before trading was halted on the NYSE. In India, Gift Nifty futures jumped more than 220 points, while Infosys shares closed 0.7 per cent higher at Rs 1,638 on the NSE.

Infosys observed volatility in its ADR price on the NYSE on 19 December, resulting in two trading pauses.

Analysts said that the rally in Infosys Ltd's ADR was driven by a short squeeze, with momentum amplified by the US Stock Lending and Borrowing (SLB) mechanism.

When traders short a stock, they borrow shares from lenders. If lenders recall those shares, short sellers are forced to buy them, often at elevated prices. This can intensify rallies. In a fast-moving instrument like the Infosys ADR, such recalls can rapidly accelerate gains. —*PTI*

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RBI issues compounding order in Genpact's FEMA case: ED

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) stated that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had issued a compounding order for Genpact India, allowing the technology firm to settle a case with a one-time payment, ending proceedings under the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA).

The ED had lodged a complaint in October 2018, alleging that Genpact had violated FEMA regulations to the tune of around Rs 26 crore. At the same time, the agency issued a show-cause notice to the company and its directors and initiated adjudication proceedings.

Subsequently, Genpact applied to the RBI for compounding of the alleged contraventions. Following the RBI's referral, the ED granted a "no objection" in line with FEMA's provisions. The RBI then issued a compounding order on 17 October, allowing Genpact to pay a one-time penalty of Rs 4.72 lakh. This effectively terminated the adjudication proceedings and any further litigation against the company and its office bearers.

ED Director Rahul Navin has previously noted that to support the government's 'ease of doing business' policy and reduce litigation, the agency encourages companies to apply for compounding in appropriate cases.

Officials have clarified that minor or technical FEMA violations are eligible for compounding, helping to end frivolous and protracted legal disputes. —*PTI*

Parle Agro profit in FY25 leaps to Rs 115. 28 cr

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

Parle Agro, owner of beverage brands such as Frooti, Appy, SMOODH and Bailley, has recorded a multi-fold growth in consolidated net profit at Rs 115.38 crore in FY25, while revenue rose 5 per cent to Rs 3,284.13 crore.

Its total income was at Rs 3,370.14 crore, up 5 per cent annually in the fiscal year ended March, 2025, according to Tofler.

In FY25, Parle Agro reported a net profit of Rs 17.3 crore and domestic revenue of Rs 3,214.27 crore, while advertising expenses fell to Rs 256.83 crore. Total expenses of Parle Agro were marginally up by 0.8 per cent at Rs 3,221.39 crore in FY25.

The company, led by Prakash J Chauhan, focuses on India's beverage industry. —*PTI*

Ethanol glut driving losses: Union Minister

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

Union Forest Minister Bhupender Yadav said "there's so much ethanol that everyone is running at loss" during an informal meeting in the Parliament on 14 December, a viral video show.

Yadav was meeting a group of MPs across party lines to discuss the proposed ethanol factory in Rajasthan's Hanumangarh district. Farmers have been protesting the proposed plant, with the demonstrators clashing with police last week.

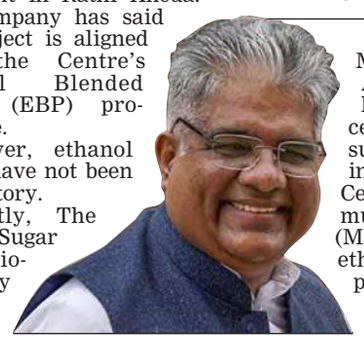
Dune Ethanol Private Limited, a Chandigarh-based company, is setting up a 40-megawatt grain-based ethanol plant in Rathi Kheda.

The company has said the project is aligned with the Centre's Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) programme.

However, ethanol prices have not been satisfactory.

Recently, The Indian Sugar and Bio-energy Manufacturers Association (ISMA) has flagged concerns over surplus sugar stocks and falling prices, urging the Centre to revise minimum support price (MSP) of sugar and ethanol procurement prices to protect farmers and mills.

- ISMA has flagged concerns over surplus sugar stocks and falling prices, urging the revision of minimum support price of sugar and ethanol prices to protect farmers



The MSP has not been revised for six years.

According to Ballani, domestic consumption is almost 28.5 lakh tons, and diversion towards ethanol has also declined compared to last year.

"We are diverting lesser than last year," he said, adding that even after accounting for "1.5 million of exports, we will have a huge stock in the country." —*Agencies*

Sebi to form working group on tech frontier for stock exchanges

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

Markets regulator Sebi is looking to constitute a working group to identify the next technological frontier for stock exchanges, its chairman Tuhin Kanta Pandey said on Saturday.

The group will focus on how exchange technology should evolve over the next 5-10 years, benchmark global best practices, and develop new methods to strengthen market infrastructure.

The technological frontier refers to the application of cutting-edge technologies to enhance market oversight, improve operational efficiency, as well as strengthen investor protection.

While acknowledging that disruptions can occur due to rapid technological changes, he emphasised the need for stronger safeguards.

To address technical flaws, Pandey said, exchanges are required to conduct detailed root-cause analyses and submit comprehensive standard operating procedures (SOPs) and corrective measures. —*PTI*

9 pharma companies strike deal with Trump to lower drug prices

WASHINGTON, 20 DEC

US President Donald Trump on Friday announced agreements with nine major pharmaceutical companies to lower prescription drug prices in the United States. agreed to align Medicaid drug prices with those in other developed countries. Newly launched medicines from these companies will also follow "most-favoured-nation" pricing across Medicare, Medicaid, commercial insurance and cash-pay markets.

The move is expected to ease pressure on state Medicaid budgets and benefit uninsured patients, though some medicines could still cost hundreds of dollars a month.

Health economist William Padula said Medicaid already enjoys some of the lowest prices, making the overall impact uncertain, but noted little downside to the initiative.

The companies will also sell medicines directly through the TrumpRx platform launching in January and donate active pharmaceutical ingredients to a national reserve for emergencies. Bristol Myers Squibb will provide its blood thinner Eliquis free to Medicaid.

With these deals, the administration has now secured price agreements with 14 drugmakers, following Trump's warning that tariffs could be imposed if companies failed to cooperate. —*PTI*

EYE WORK OPPORTUNITIES

Students going abroad need affordability: Report

MUMBAI, 20 DEC

Affordability and work opportunities are the top priorities driving student decisions on overseas education.

The top priorities driving student decisions today are affordability, post-study work opportunities, and the impact of AI in education, said the report by Leap Scholar, which is an AI-powered study abroad ecosystem.

The report revealed that Germany recorded a 377 per cent year-on-year increase in Indian student interest for 2024-25, jumping up from 219 per cent from the preceding year.

New Zealand saw a 2,900 per cent year-on-year growth (from 6 per cent), and in the UAE, this percentage was at 5,400 per cent (compared to 7 per cent earlier), it added.

Germany's 18-month post-study work visa, the UAE's lower cost than Western universities along with accessibility, and New Zealand's immigration policies featuring a post-study work visa that allows students to work for up to three years are what is attracting Indian students.

"It's no longer a question of affordability alone. It is also about what the return is," explained Leap Scholar co-founder Arnav Kumar.

While 40.4 per cent of respondents pursue Master's programmes in AI, machine learning, or data science, 59.6 per cent opt for broader Master's degrees that incorporate AI modules, it said.

The report also found a gender gap with males comprising 58 per cent of the applicants while females were 42 per cent.

Women are increasingly applying for STEM programmes abroad, particularly in AI and data science, the report added. —*PTI*

Musk recovers $55B pay package in US court ruling

DOVER, 20 DEC

Elon Musk, the world's richest man, received a significant financial boost on Friday when the Delaware Supreme Court reinstated a $55 billion pay package from Tesla awarded in 2018. This decision overturns a January 2024 ruling by Chancellor Kathaleen St Jude McCormick, which had taken the compensation away following a case from a discontented Tesla shareholder.

Musk's frustration over McCormick's ruling prompted him to reincorporate Tesla in Texas, spurring the company's board to seek shareholder approval for the original pay package, valued at $44.9 billion at the time of the second vote 18 months ago. With lingering dissatisfaction, Tesla proposed another pay package this year, potentially worth $1 trillion if Musk can elevate the automaker's market value from $1.6 trillion to $8.5 trillion over the next decade, which shareholders approved last month.

In her earlier ruling, McCormick contended the package was formulated by a board too closely aligned with Musk. However, the Delaware Supreme Court's 49-page ruling identified errors in McCormick's decision, awarding Tesla $1 in nominal damages. —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

1st Women's T20I: India will take on Sri Lanka today

VISAKHAPATNAM, 20 DEC

India's quest to find stable support acts who will serve them at least until next year's World Cup will begin with the first Women's T20I of the five-match series against Sri Lanka here on Sunday.The familiar faces skipper Harmanpreet Kaur, her deputy Smriti Mandhana, Jemimah Rodrigues, Deepti Sharma, and Renuka Singh are there, but it cannot be forgotten that they are either in their 30s or moving fast to that mark.In that context, the Indian think tank will watch the evolution of young batter G Kamalini and promising left-arm spinner Vaishanavi Sharma closely.The 17-year-old Kamalini has shown her maturity across various stages for Tamil Nadu in the BCCI U23 T20 Trophy, then in the U19 World Cup earlier this year, and later in the Women's Premier League for the Mumbai Indians. Match starts @ 7 PM.—*PTI*

Indian challengers eye glory in World 25K Kolkata

KOLKATA, 20 DEC

A strong international field, led by world champions and Olympic medallists, will line up alongside India's best distance runners at the 10th Tata Steel World 25K Kolkata, a World Athletics Gold Label Road Race, here on Sunday. Three globally recognised marathoners Tanzania's Alphonce Simbu, Uganda's Joshua Cheptegei, and Lesotho's Tebello Ramakongoana will be competing in the 25K distance for the first time, adding excitement to one of the fastest courses. Reigning men's marathon world champion Simbu, who also won bronze at the 2017 Worlds, said he was looking forward to the challenge.—*PTI*

PHOTO: X/@NBA

NBA Roundup: Anthony shines as Wolves rally past

NEW YORK, 20 DEC

Anthony Edwards scored 26 points and grabbed 12 rebounds as the Minnesota Timberwolves rallied for a 112-107 win over the Oklahoma City Thunder on Friday night in Minneapolis. Julius Randle added 19 points and eight rebounds for Minnesota, which closed the fourth quarter on an 8-0 run in the final minute. Donte DiVincenzo and Naz Reid scored 15 points apiece as the Timberwolves won for the eighth time in 10 games. Oklahoma City led 107-104 with 1:09 remaining after Holmgren sank a pair of free throws. Randle cut the deficit to two when he made the first of two free-throw attempts with 53.1 seconds to go.—*PTI*

Shaurya leads in Asian Tour Q-School

HUA HIN, 20 DEC

Indian golfer Shaurya Bhattacharya moved into the top spot with a card of five-under-par 66 on the A&B course in the Asian Tour's Qualifying School here on Saturday. He moved to 16-under for a one-shot lead and is now in an ideal position to take one of the 35 cards on the line for next year's season. Japan's Tomohiro Ishizaka, the overnight leader, was in second, also following a 66, with Roberto Lebrija of Mexico one shot back in third. Shubham Jaglan, the other Indian in a good position to pick up a Tour card, carded 3-under 68 to move to the C&D course, and he is Tied-eighth.The 72-hole cut was made on Saturday at two under.—*PTI*

T20 WC: Gill ignored; Ishan and Rinku Singh make cut

All-rounder Axar Patel was named the VC of the squad

MUMBAI, 20 DEC

Chief selector Ajit Agarkar on Saturday said Shubman Gill's recent lack of runs, coupled with team combination compulsions, led to his omission from India's squad for the T20 World Cup.

Taking a bold call to maximise impact over reputation, the Indian selectors on Saturday dropped Shubman Gill from the T20 World Cup squad and brought back wicketkeeper-batter Ishan Kishan, along with Rinku Singh."We know what a quality player he is, but, perhaps short of a little bit of runs at the moment," said Agarkar in the press conference for India's squad announcement."(He was) unfortunate to miss out on the last World Cup as well because we went to a different combination. But it's the combinations more than anything else. Two keepers at the top, that's the way we want to try. Axar Patel has been appointed as vice-captain of the Indian cricket team for the T20 World Cup 2026

Someone has to miss out when you pick (squad of) 15 and, unfortunately, it's Gill at this point, Agarkar added. Agarkar stressed that they wanted to have an extra wicketkeeper at the top and had to sacrifice a pure batter for that.

In this instance, Ishan Kishan, who had a wonderful run at the just-concluded Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, found favour ahead of Jitesh Sharma, who has been used more as a lower-order quick-hitter."He bats at the top in white-ball cricket.

He's been in good form. He's played before for India. He has a double hundred in one-day cricket.

He wasn't in the Indian team because there's a Rishabh Pant and a Dhruv Jurel ahead.—*PTI*

INDIA SQUAD ANNOUNCEMENT

The 15-member squad, announced for the T20 World Cup 2026, will also feature in the five-match T20I series against New Zealand in January

■Suryakumar Yadav (captain) ■ Axar Patel (vc) ■ Abhishek Sharman ■Hardik Pandya■ Shivam Dube ■ Jasprit Bumrah ■Arshdeep Singh ■Harshit Rana ■ Sanju Samson (wk) ■ Washington Sundarn ■Varun Chakravarthy ■ Ishan Kishan (wk)■ Rinku Singh

Shubman Gill, Ishan Kishan and Rinku Singh *PHOTO: PTI*

VIJAY HAZARE TROPHY

Shami to spearhead Bengal pace attack

KOLKATA, 20 DEC

Out-of-favour India pacer Mohammed Shami, who has been in impressive form on the domestic circuit with 36 wickets across formats, has been named in Bengal's squad for the upcoming Vijay Hazare Trophy one-day competition.

Shami, who has not played for India for a while and was overlooked for the recent series against South Africa, has enjoyed a strong return to competitive cricket for Bengal following a lengthy injury layoff.

Shami's fitness has been a subject of debate in recent times after the pacer missed out on selection.

However, despite the absence of a national call-up, the senior fast bowler has been a standout performer in domestic tournaments.

Beginning with the red-ball season, Shami picked up 20 wickets from four Ranji Trophy matches at an average of 18.60, including a 5/38, as Bengal remain unbeaten from five outings after securing three outright wins to sit atop Group C.

He carried his form into the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, finishing as Bengal's leading wicket-taker with 16 scalps from seven matches at an average of 14.93.

In the Vijay Hazare Trophy, Shami will spearhead Bengal's three-pronged pace attack, which also includes India pacers Akash Deep and Mukesh Kumar.

In the squad announced on Friday, top-order batter Abhimanyu Easwaran was named captain.

Bengal has been placed in Elite Group B and will begin its campaign against Vidarbha in Rajkot on December 24. The other teams in the group are Assam, Baroda, Jammu and Kashmir, Hyderabad, Chandigarh, and Uttar Pradesh.

The tournament will be held across Ahmedabad (Group A), Rajkot (Group B), Jaipur (Group C), and Alur (Group D), while Bengaluru's Centre of Excellence will host the knockout stages from January 12-18. —*PTI*

Mohammed Shami *PHOTO: PTI*

JOSHNA & VEER REACH WESTERN INDIA SQUASH SEMIFINALS

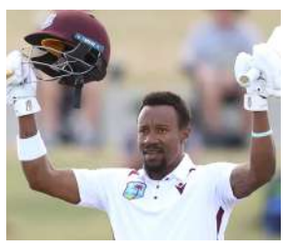
MUMBAI, 20 DEC

Joshna Chinappa and Veer Chotrani qualified for the semifinals of the CCI Western India Squash tournament here on Saturday.

Chinappa defeated Reiva Nimalkar 11-4, 11-3, 11-5 to move into the semifinals, whereas the second seed, Sanya Vats, had to struggle to get the better of Pooja Arthi R 11-6, 10-12, 11-3, 11-5 for her spot in the final four.In the men's category, Chotrani was made to work hard by Mahesh Mangaonkar. Chotrani fought hard to record a win of 11-9, 11-9, 12-10.In another match, the second seed Suraj Chand defeated Purav Rambhia 11-3, 11-5, 11-1. —*PTI*

Hodge hundred keeps West Indies' fight on

MOUNT MAUNGANUI, 20 DEC



Kavem Hodge scored his second Test century and played an anchor role for the West Indies, who showed resilience with the bat again on the third day of the third test against New Zealand.

Hodge was 109 not out at stumps, Anderson Phillip was 12, and the West Indies were 381-6 Saturday, having avoided the follow-on as they replied to New Zealand's 575-8.

They achieved that goal, though they were without first test century-maker Shai Hope, who has been out of action for the past two days with an unspecified illness. New Zealand leads the three-match series 1-0 after the first test was drawn and the Black Caps won the second by nine wickets. Hodge made 120 against England at Trent Bridge in July 2024 but had been past 50 only once in the 16 innings between that day and his redemptive innings at Bay Oval on Saturday. I've been trying to understand what I will face here in New Zealand and come up with a plan to combat it." Hodge struggled to cement his place in the West Indies' team after his maiden century, missed the drawn first test, and made 0 and 35 in the second test.

West Indies 381 for 6 (Hodge 109*, King 63, Duffy 2-79) trail New Zealand 575 for 8 dec (Conway 227, Latham 137, Ravindra 72*, Greaves 2-83) by 194 runs —*PTI*

DAY 4: 3RD TEST

Lyon, Cummins shut the door on England's slim Ashes hopes

ADELAIDE, 20 DEC

Nathan Lyon severely dented England's desperate Ashes survival bid with three quick blows on 3rd Ashes Test Day 4 Just as England was starting to gain confidence Saturday, chasing what needed to be a world-record 435 to keep the Ashes series alive, Lyon returned to the Australian attack. Crawley (85) and Brook (30) had combined in a 68-run stand to revive England's innings from 109-3 to 177-3 after Australia skipper Pat Cummins took out the top order.

On his second ball, Lyon dismissed a cavalier Brook, who reached too far and completely missed an extravagant reverse sweep.

The 38-year-old spinner quickly took three wickets for eight runs in a sequence that ripped through the middle order, and suddenly England was 194-6. Stokes, England's totemic leader, was out trying to defend against Lyon but missed a turning ball that rattled his off stump. Crawley, batting patiently in pursuit of a sixth test century, was deceived by a drifting Lyon delivery and stumped by Alex Carey.

At stumps on Day 4, England was 207-6 and needing 228 runs for an improbable victory in the third test.

"We'll reflect on today and make plans for tomorrow," Australia wicketkeeper Carey said in a post-match TV interview, trying to play down his team's strong position.

Of Lyon's impact, Carey added: "He toiled away all day, finally got some reward."

England 286 and 207 for 6 (Crawley 85, Cummins 3-24, Lyon 3-64) need 228 runs to beat Australia 371 and 349 (Head 170, Carey 72, Tongue 4-70) —*PTI*

Pedro rescues an exciting Chelsea draw at Newcastle

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

Chelsea recovered from conceding two early goals to Nick Woltemade to draw 2-2 with Newcastle in the Premier League on Saturday, with Joao Pedro's equalizer coming off a rare assist from a goalkeeper. Robert Sanchez smashed a long clearance up to Pedro, who headed the ball forward and ended up collecting it himself after Fabian Schar slipped. Pedro slotted a finish underneath Newcastle goalkeeper Aaron Ramsdale to earn Chelsea a point in the 66th minute.

Woltemade put Chelsea 2-0 up by scoring from close range in the fourth minute and then glancing home a cross from Anthony Gordon in the 20th. Reece James launched Chelsea's fightback by curling a free kick in off the post in the 49th.

Fourth-place Chelsea trimmed its gap to Arsenal to seven points ahead of the leader's match at Everton later Saturday. Newcastle missed a chance to climb into the top half of the standings. —*PTI*

Satwik-Chirag pair falters to Liang-Wang

HANGZHOU, 20 DEC

Indian men's doubles pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty bowed out of the BWF World Tour Finals after losing the semifinal to China's Liang Wei Keng and Wang Chang here Saturday.

The Indians won the first game but failed to capitalise on the advantage, going down 21-10, 17-21, 13-21 in the last-four contest that lasted one hour and three minutes.

Satwik and Chirag had beaten their opponents in the group stage, but the Chinese pair turned the tables on them when it mattered the most.

The Indian duo was unbeaten in the group stage in the season-ending tournament, but Saturday's defeat meant that they could not become the first men's pair to reach the summit clash of the coveted event. They then became the first Indian men's pair to reach the semifinals of the season-ending event.

The two pairs split the first 10 points, with the Indians targeting Liang. —*PTI*

AFCON TO BE HELD EVERY FOUR YEARS AFTER 2028: CAF

RABAT, 20 DEC

The Africa Cup of Nations will be held every four years instead of every two years, the Confederation of African Football said on Saturday.

The surprise decision was made at the body's executive committee meeting in Morocco's capital Rabat and announced at a press conference by CAF President Patrice Motsepe. The tournament, which generates an estimated 80 per cent of CAF's revenue, has been held every two years since its inception in 1957.

Sunday marks the start of the 35th edition, hosted in Morocco. —*PTI*

U-19 ASIA CUP FINAL

India looks to extend dominance against Pak

DUBAI, 20 DEC

Eyeing a record-extending 12th title, a dominant India will look to underline their supremacy over arch-rivals Pakistan when they clash in the Under-19 Asia Cup final at the ICC Academy, here on Sunday.

The Ayush Mhatre-led Indian colts have been a class apart, winning all their Group A matches to finish on top ahead of Pakistan, who suffered their only group-stage defeat against India, a 90-run loss last Sunday.

India carried that momentum into the semifinals on Friday, brushing aside Sri Lanka by eight wickets. Pakistan, on the other hand, reached the final by knocking out defending champions Bangladesh.

India's march to the final has been built on an all-round effort, with batters and bowlers gelling together seamlessly to form a formidable unit.

With the bat, India have been nothing short of spectacular, posting two 400-plus totals.

The 50-over tournament has seen the rise of exciting young talents, such as 17-year-old wicketkeeper-batter Abhigyan Kundu.

If teenage prodigy Vaibhav Suryavanshi set the tone in the opener against UAE with a breathtaking 95-ball 171 as India piled up 433/6, Kundu etched his name into the record books against Malaysia.

The left-hander smashed an unbeaten 125-ball 209, becoming the first Indian to score a double century in Youth ODIs.

The duo will look for yet another good show against a disciplined Pakistan bowling attack. —*PTI*

India is No. 1 in anti-doping rule violations for first time

NEW DELHI, 20 DEC

For the first time, India has become No. 1 in the anti-doping rule violations (ADRVs) report published by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) with a total of 222 cases for 2023.

Russia, perennially No. 1 in ADRVs, has come second this time with 209 cases, including 100 instances of non-analytical ADRVs. The number for India includes five non-analytical ADRVs. WADA released these figures on the night of Friday, Dec 19. ADRVs correspond to the sanctions an anti-doping agency imposes on violators of rules, a large chunk of them for testing positive. Coming as it does with India having occupied the top spot for the third year running in the number of adverse analytical findings (AAFs) for 2024, the latest WADA report, though on expected lines, only confirms India's status as the leading 'doping country' in the world. This should not, however, lead to a slackening of tempo in the anti-doping efforts, which could lead to a more drastic outcome in the near future. The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), which had in the recent past named India in two of its special reports, including one on doping among the minors. —*PTI*